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ON THE COVER

WORLD OF WARSHIPS

p. 42

Wargaming's new free to
play game is both thrilling
and based on math!



REVIEW

ROCKET LEAGUE

p. 55

No matter how unskilled you are, Rocket League is a winner



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Keep your PC from boiling over

TECH

SYNC OR SWIM

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Which variable refresh rate standard will win?



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German Efficiency

I wish I was in Germany. Due to a couple of factors involving deadlines and other important work related matters I was not able to make it to Gamescom this year. Instead of being on the show floor, getting hands on with Fallout 4, I'm instead here at my desk writing the final page of issue 243. Hopefully next year I can organise things so I can be there. It's going to be important to start making inroads with European developers and distributors in the near future. While development in the US and UK hasn't died, it has certainly become more consolidated (at least outside of indies) into the larger franchises, leaving greater Europe as the hotbed of interesting AAA PC game development. You've got Wargaming, CDPR, Haemimont, Paradox Interactive, Piranha Bytes and Larian to name but a few companies that have been very interesting of late. Europe also has a thriving indie scene, so there's that too. Gamescom is also the most organised event I have ever been to. It is the epitome of German efficiency, something that is a boon when you're trying to get as much content written up as possible.

As always, it's kind of a strange time just before one of the big events. Studios and publishers go quiet, with the only correspondence being queries about possible appointments at the show, and few games are released. As I write this it's only the first day of the show, with no big reveals or announcements as yet. By the time you read this all the cats will be out of their respective bags. I'm hoping for some pretty great stuff to come out, especially when it comes to Star Wars Battlefront, Deus Ex: Mankind Divided and Rise of the Tomb Raider. My big query for Gamescom, however, is this – with Blizzard announcing the next WoW expansion at the event, what will be their big announcement for Blizzcon? My money is on either Warcraft 4, a WoW action game or a Starcraft FPS.

Daniel Wilks
Editor
[@drwilkenstein](#)



QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"An angry man baby who never touched a boobie"

"YOLO nut shake"

"I'm too old for change!"

PC PowerPlay

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INTERN In need of a new one

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THIS MONTH...



DANIEL WILKS
Angered some people
online
[@drwilkenstein](#)



MALCOLM CAMPBELL
Ate another sandwich



BENNETT RING
Got whooping cough
[@benettring](#)



JAMES COTTEE
Suffered feature creep
[@j_cottee](#)



MEGHANN O'NEILL
Ate long pig
[@firkraags](#)



JAMES O'CONNOR
Stanted getting educated
[@jickle](#)



BEN MANSILL
Fretted over haikus



NATHAN LAWRENCE
Went to Germany



PATRICK STAFFORD
Weathered a Blizzard
[@pdstafford](#)



DAVID HOLLINGWORTH
Grew a beard



ALEX MANN
Kept trying to make
coffee dates



CAMERON FERRIS
Had a deviated septum
[@pcpowerplay](#)



SEAN FLETCHER
Became KFC

FRONTEND



PREVIEW

42 World of Warships

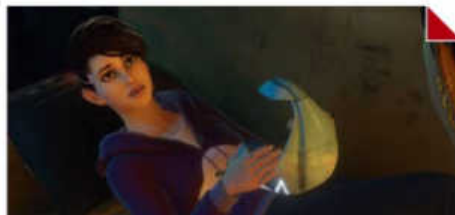
Slower than World of Tanks but just as thrilling



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36 The Rise and Fall of Starcraft

StarCraft isn't just losing viewers, it's losing players



28 Indies

The best of independent development



32 10 to Watch

The most exciting games on the horizon



REAL MECH OR NOTHING

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experience simply because it was new at the time or because you were of an age that caused it to have maximum impact. You're absolutely right about your second point. We live in a golden age of gaming that has taken the lessons of the past and the technological mastery of the present.

UPGRADED

Hi Guys.

Usually when it comes to PC gear I look through that part of the magazine, yet usually don't pay much attention. I like to upgrade every three to four years and that time for me is now up. We've got some killer games on the horizon with Star Wars and Mad Max hitting stores soon. So I know it's not the time for delay. Your game gear issue could not have come at a better time. The reviews in there were very helpful and I'm weighing up whether to get the parts or lay out for that Green Machine from ScorpTec.

Very tempting.

And thank you for supporting the Australian game industry, the government sure doesn't!

Coal will always be more appealing.

Regards

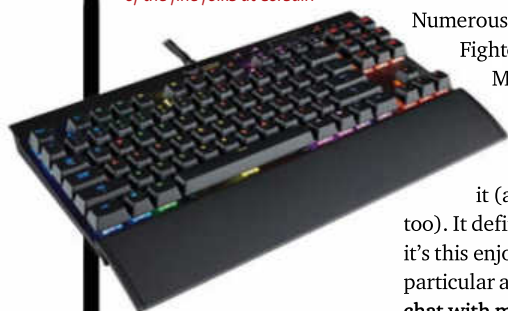
Mitchell Hall

Not a problem Mitchell



LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS!

Write in to PCPP with your rants, considered opinions, and endless run-on sentences of pure awesome. The address is letters@pcpowerplay.com.au. Each letter read by hand! This Letter of the Month winner scores himself a K65 RGB mechanical keyboard courtesy of the fine folks at Corsair!



LETTER OF THE MONTH MISTY WATERCOLOURED MEMORIES

I think I have to disagree with Mr Lundberg on his article in issue #241 about nostalgia.

Often is the case when you talk highly about previous games, it's easy for people to disregard it as nostalgia and perhaps the experience was not actually as good as we remember it to be. While it certainly might be the case in some situations - I don't believe it's the rule. There is a host of games (past and present) that have something that sparks some part of the brain while playing that seems to stimulate joy more than others. If it were a person, we might call it charisma, but I don't believe there is a name for it in entertainment.

Numerous games, such as TIE Fighter, Privateer, C&C, MOO2 etc. I can pick up and I get that same feeling now as I did when I first played it (and rack up the hours too). It definitely is not nostalgia, it's this enjoyment in something particular about that game. A quick chat with many of the people on the mentioned GOG site will confirm it isn't just Nostalgia for them as well. Those games we speak highly about just had something within the game

itself beyond any other associations outside of the game.

Which leads me to the next point I feel I need to disagree with, in how we shouldn't compare newer games to those golden oldies. Not because of the danger of nostalgia skewing opinions, but rather because it does a disservice to the quality of games released over the last few years. Games have come out in increasing frequency that have caused that same spark I felt in those older games. That same sense of joy and achievement that had definitely missing in the years prior, those years when the cries of the golden age of gaming were at their loudest. Games like The Banner Saga, The Witcher series, Wasteland 2 and so on, these are games for me that deserve to be held up as equals to those greats of yesteryear. To not allow those comparisons I think is to not acknowledge that, for the first time in a long while, games are being released that are every bit as golden as those oldies we hold in such high esteem...and perhaps - even more so.

Kind regards

Matthew Schmidt

Hi Matthew - there are definitely some games that stand the test of time but the difficulty with nostalgia is that sometimes it can influence memories, heightening and

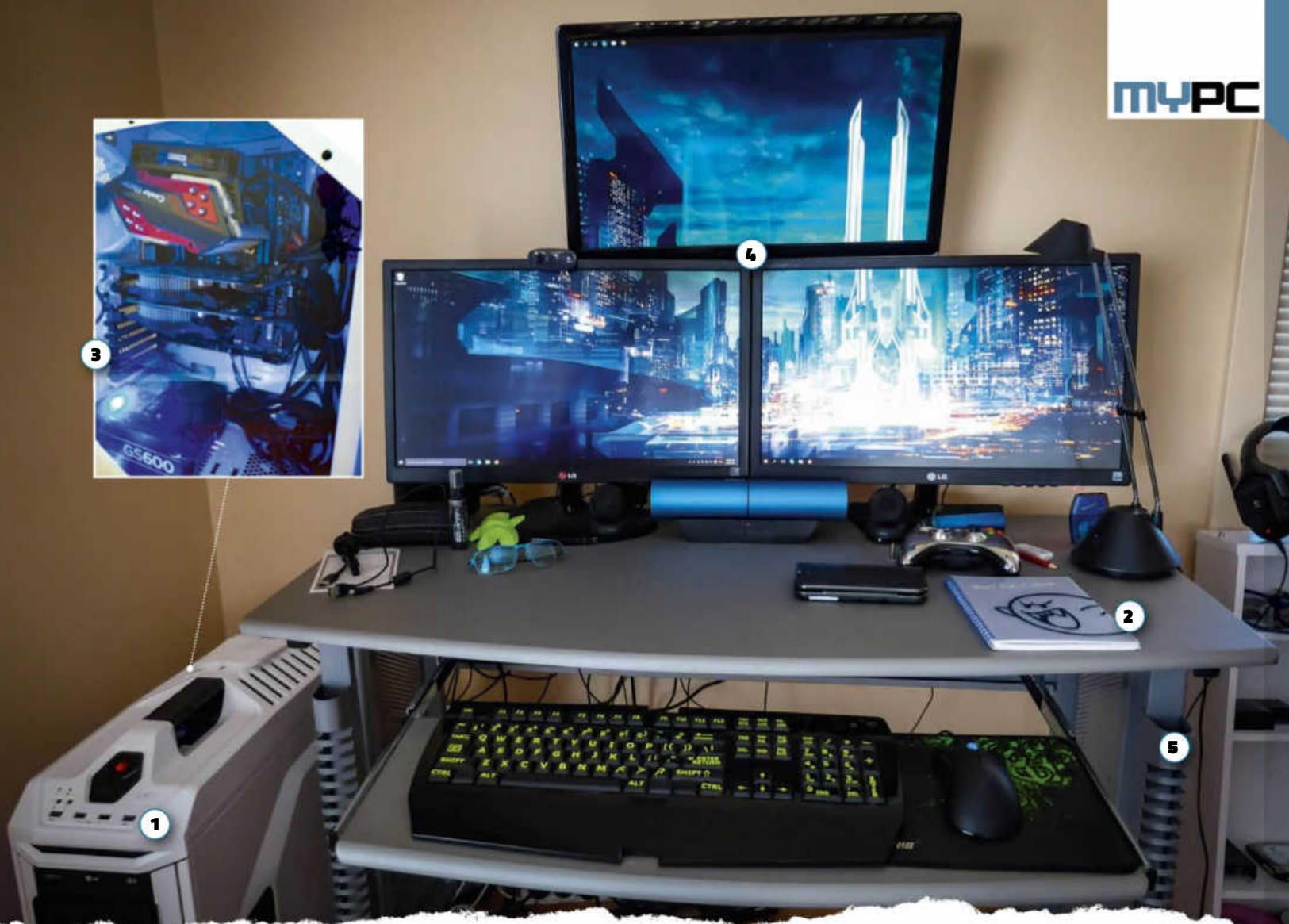
FEEDBACK #242

► **Matthew Schmidt:** Had some of the best picture captions ever in a PCPowerPlay. The Fallout 4 captions were of particular delight. OH - and the Indiana Jones reference with AC. I chortled merrily at that one.

► **Shannan Bienen:** Fallout 4 better be on the cover or I am going to be pissed. Just joking love you guys

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JACK AGE 17 | PORT LINCOLN, SA

This month's MY PC brought to you by

4 MOST IMPRESSIVE ELEMENTS:

1. 3 monitors. This triangle formation is awesome for multitasking (I would have them side by side, but my computer isn't powerful enough to run games at that resolution...)
2. Dual Gigabyte Radeon HD 7770 GHz Edition 1GB GPUs.
3. 16GB (4x4GB) DDR3 1600MHz Corsair memory. More than enough RAM for me.
4. Cooler Master Storm Stryker Case. I love people's reactions when they see this case.

LAST UPGRADE: My last upgrade was the case. I originally had a cheap Antec case, but I upgraded to the Stryker because the case had poor cooling performance, and was very loud.

DREAM UPGRADE: My dream upgrade would be a new video card. As of now, my video card of choice would be the GTX 980 Ti, as I would be able to play all of the latest games on the highest settings.

FAVOURITE FEATURE:

My favourite feature would be the three screens, and their triangle formation. It just blows everyone's mind.

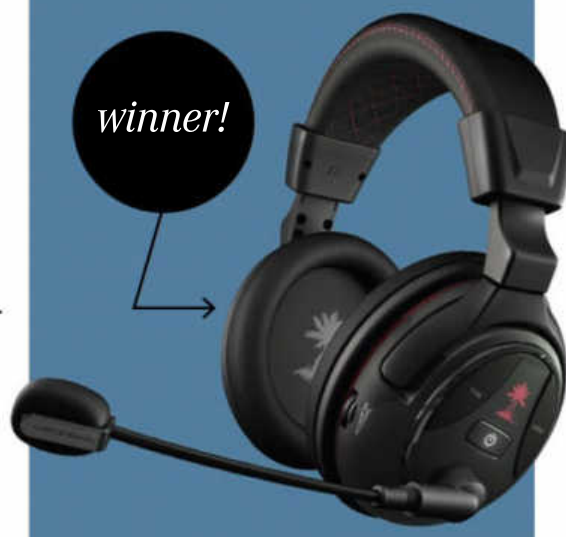
WHY SO SPECIAL?

This was the first computer I ever built myself. I made many mistakes along the way (such as getting two mid-range GPUs instead of one high-end GPU), but almost three years later and it is still serving me well. I have no problem playing the latest games (not always on high). It was pretty good for a first time build.

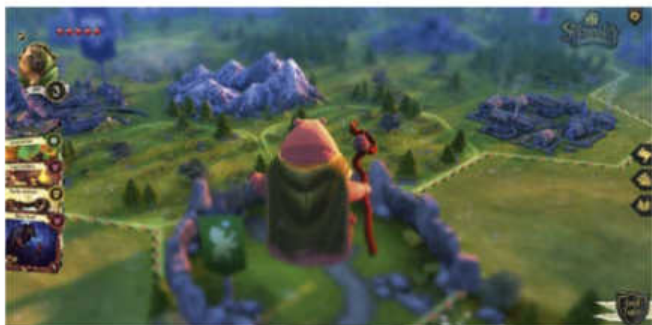
1. What kind of monster uses a Cylon as a computer case?
2. That's a Nintendo character, you traitor!
3. Nice clean cabling for a first build
4. When two screens just isn't enough
5. CD racks for desk legs - flawed but interesting

JACK WINS!

A swanky new pair of Turtle Beach Earforce Z300 headphones. Enjoy!



WANT FREE STUFF? Send your MyPC entry today to mypc@pcpowerplay.com.au. Include the four most impressive elements of its hardware, your last upgrade, your dream upgrade, your favourite feature and what you think makes your PC special. Make sure to include your name, age and location. And last but not least, attach a 5MP or bigger image of your PC! No camera phone shots, and make sure it's in focus!



AUSTRALIAN GAME ARMELLO GETS RELEASE DATE, NEW CHARACTERS

Armello is still in Early Access, but not for long!

Armello, in the words of its creators - League of Geeks - is a "fantasy board game come to life". It's a game of evil lion kings, heroic animal clans, and the struggle to claim the throne and save a terrorised population.

It's pretty intense, adorably cute, and really, really good. It's also

Australian, and League of Geeks has just announced its release date - the game will be hitting PC and PS4 on September 1st this year.

The Geeks have also announced two new heroes: Zosha the rat and Barnaby the rabbit. Both will be playable at PAX this year.

RAZER BUYS OPEN-SOURCE CONSOLE-MAKER OUYA

Ouya is dead - long live Ouya?

For a lot of people, the Android-based Ouya console was a dream come true. It was open source, it was cheap, and it crowdfunded to incredible success. But a troubled launch and stagnant life has left the dream, if not a nightmare, then at least nothing to get excited about.

And now, following Razer's acquisition of the company, the Ouya hardware is officially dead. Razer's more interested in the software side of the company, including its digital store, which will be rebranded as Cortex for Android TV, for Razer's own Forge TV platform.

"Razer has a long-term vision for Android TV and Android-based

TV consoles, such as the Xiaomi Mi Box and Alibaba Tmall Box, to which OUYA already publishes," said Razer Co-Founder and CEO Min-Liang Tan in the recent announcement. "OUYA's work with game developers, both triple

A and indies, went a long way in bringing Android games to the living room and Razer intends to further that work. This acquisition is envisaged to usher more developers and content to the Android TV platform."

For those who do own an Ouya, Razer intends to work with users to migrate them to the Forge console and controller, along with their entire games collection, and with some discounts to boot.



BATTLETECH PC STRATEGY GAME COMING TO KICKSTARTER THIS YEAR

Mech stomping action is coming back to PC!

Mechwarrior Online is okay fun, but we're really excited about the new BattleTech game that's just been announced (or that we maybe just noticed). Harebrained Schemes has revealed it's going to be launching a Kickstarter later in the year for a turn-based BattleTech game, and we are so in for that action.

Even better, Jordan Weisman, the creator of the original miniatures and roleplaying games (and a myriad of other titles) is on board.

"Harebrained Schemes is pleased to announce their return to Kickstarter this Fall

to partner with Backers in co-funding the creation of BATTLETECH. Jordan Weisman, the creator of BattleTech and MechWarrior, is back with the first turn-based BattleTech game for PC in over two decades. Steeped in the feudal political intrigue of the BattleTech universe, the game will feature an open-ended Mercenaries-style campaign that blends RPG 'Mech and MechWarrior management with modern turn-based tactics."

Check out the rather bare (for now) official site (<http://battletechgame.com/>), and keep an eye out for the Kickstarter. We will be!

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FALLOUT ANTHOLOGY SHIPS WITH SWEET MINI-NUKE

Fallout Anthology contains all games in the series, to date, and one sweet mini-nuke case

The chances are good that if you're a Fallout fan, you already own every game in the series. But that's unlikely to stop you from being tempted to buy them all over again, if only for the admittedly cool collectable mini-nuke container.

Surprisingly, this cool piece of Fallout swag is a PC-exclusive collection, and Pete Hines, VP of marketing and PR at Bethesda, said it's "super limited" during the announcement of the collection at the QuakeCon introduction.

As for non-swig things, the mini-nuke case contains Fallout, Fallout 2, Fallout Tactics, Fallout 3: Game of the Year Edition, and Fallout New Vegas: Ultimate Edition.

In the spirit of DVD boxed collections, there's even a spot for Fallout 4 to slot into the mini-nuke container once it launches on the 10th of November. Fallout Anthology is on sale in Australia on the 1st of October and will cost just \$99.95 in Australia. That's a lot of game for just a C-note.



DOOM UNLEASHES HELL IN AUTUMN 2016

Release windows + details on the alpha and beta.

Doom is coming to a PC near you in autumn 2016. That's a basic conversion of the "spring 2016" release date that was announced hours ago at the QuakeCon introduction, and means the reimagining of the daddy of the first-person shooter will hit sometime in March, April or May. Executive producer Marty Stratton took to the stage to share the release window, and to also talk about the beta and the upcoming alpha.

For those who pre-ordered Wolfenstein: The New Order, you probably noticed that the game included access to the Doom beta. While Stratton mentioned the beta won't be ready until closer to release in 2016, he did mention a couple of interesting points. The first is that it's a multiplayer beta, which means that story details will be preserved and The New Order pre-orderers will

have a chance to try their hand at "fast-paced, arena-style multiplayer".

The other bit of news is that there will be a Doom alpha. Stratton said names will be randomly pulled from the pool of beta folks who pre-ordered The New Order so, if you're one of those people, you might have the chance to play the Doom alpha later this year, or "soon" as Stratton put it.

Doom, in alpha form, is playable at QuakeCon on the show floor right now, so keep your eyes peeled on PC PowerPlay-related publications for our thoughts once we've taken it for a spin. If it's anything like the fantastic pace of Quake III—or, better still, the amazing speed of Rocket Arena 3—we'll be spending some time in Quake Live prior to launch to improve reaction time that's been dulled by the slower shooter experiences of Battlefield.

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Mastering Orion

Space is big. Space games needn't be.

Unless the new MOO is a back to basics simple affair, I reckon it'll tank. Have you ever tried to play Endless Space? It can't be done. It's too big. Too ridiculously complicated. Too time consuming, and by 'time consuming' I'm saying that playing any recent Civ game all the way through on a huge world is a mere flash of time compared to the eons you need to invest in a single Endless Space game.

This is what space-based 4X games have become, and it's all MOO's fault. In space, the only way to go is outward, so the piles and piles of MOO-clones over the past couple of decades have stacked on the detail and depth, the devs thinking that this is what we wanted. It is not!

The defined scope of a 4X game is limited by the four exes themselves. They are four holes that need filling, and don't you dare think of adding another, or filling one much more than the others. It's an evenly balanced game formula that has penned itself in with rigidly structured boundaries.

Devs must love that. How can you ever disappoint gamers if a simple colour-by-numbers formula is all they expect? In the midst of that comfort zone there's no escaping that, somehow, the genre must evolve, and work must be seen to be done.

So what do they do? Add add add a great deal more of the same. More stuff in the same but deeper holes. You liked choosing your spaceships in MOO/2, didn't you? I sure did, I even wished back then that it would be nice if we could do a bit of customising. Everyone wanted that, and said so in forums and to the faces of the new breed of devs eager to make the greatest 4X



game ever. So now 4X games have entire games within games for making spaceships.

You can spend hours mucking around with a modern 4X space game's ship design stuff. But it's not just a distraction from the big picture, or even a segment of it, anymore. It's an activity unto itself that becomes one of many such time monsters. It's like going to work for the day and thinking over your morning coffee "I'll knock over the starship designs before lunch, that should give me time to make peace with the bloody Klackons via re-loading save games a few dozen times til they agree to my outrageous terms, then go home for the day."

Everyone thought diplomacy was a

intent to get to the point that, with some reliability, you could dabble in some space talk.

And don't even get me started on research... ho boy.

4X gaming skills are not portable from other 4X games – you need to play a 4X game through several long times to get your head around what works, and what does not, and should not be attempted.

That's sort of fun, if you have nothing else to do. Like me in the 1990s when there were far fewer games, so I spent pretty much every weekend for about two years playing MOO2. Yes, I really did. I uncovered every quirk and exploit and weakness there was. I could build the perfect ship for any point in the game, and it was really cool because it was nice to get really really good at a 4X game.

I tried to repeat the same lust for total understanding with other 4X games, post-MOO2, but it just wasn't possible. The deeper and bigger they got, the harder the task, and all with many other gaming distractions beckoning. I mention Endless Space in this piece because that's the one I tried the hardest to get into. But a few playthroughs only began to hint at the best way to play. The perfect path. Years would be needed.

If, somehow, Wargaming can avoid the temptation to get crazy with the detail, and instead produce a charming, relatively simple 4Xer, I'm in. Even better if they manage to convey to me the fantasy that I'm really taking over the galaxy. That's what it's supposed to be about, even if people like me see it as a giant maths puzzle to be beaten.

How can you ever disappoint gamers if a simple colour-by-numbers formula is all they expect?

bit of a pain in the arse, right? It made perfect sense to whack something basic in a game like that, mainly to breathe a bit of life into the foes. But like 100% of everything in a 4X game, one is simply not interested in pretending one is engaged in intergalactic diplomacy, no, one just wants to figure out how the game engine ticks and exploit the buggery out of it.

Make peace, declare war, screw someone over for profit. These diplomatic bits were the most impossible to figure out, so apparently random was the underlying code that you really had to experiment with



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The Vapour Wave

With the delivery of Star Citizen still nowhere in sight, some are wondering if its backers have fallen victim to Space Madness...

It seems like only yesterday that the two brightest stars of the space combat genre were going supernova on Kickstarter. What a dream come true for aging PC gamers – Elite and Privateer were coming back! Now the future has arrived, and these projects have taken very different forms. Elite Dangerous has a silly name, but it is a real game that you can really play.

Star Citizen is something else. The game is now projected to hit Version 1.0 some time in 2016, but given the rate at which new features are being added (mini-games, space pets, a first-person shooter mode, etc.) that launch window could well slip even further.

In stark contrast to David Braben's policy of delivering a game first and adding features later, Chris Roberts has allowed the scale of his ambition to ramp up in direct proportion to the monies he has received. In his September 2014 'Letter From the Chairman,' he admitted as much: "Long ago I stopped looking at this game the way I did when I worked for a publisher who gave me a fixed budget to make a retail game. I now look at our monthly fundraising and use that to set the amount of resources being used to develop this game."

Roberts Space Industries has so far ingested over US\$85 million from backers, with some individuals spending in the tens of thousands of dollars. Star Citizen ships are not cheap, and the largest pre-purchase package retails for US\$15,000. While that deal does contain an awful lot of imaginary ships, they are imaginary ships for a game that is, as of this writing, still imaginary itself.

Furthermore, the Star Citizen Terms



of Service spell out that 'virtual goods' such as ships, characters, insurance, and credits, are not actually owned by the player. They are merely licensed:

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A license within a license, a dream within a dream. While it's possible that

insane. Stop it... To a large degree Star Citizen just seems like a classic case of sunk costs for users + Stockholm syndrome :)"

Battlecruiser 3000AD creator Dr. Derek Smart (PhD) has been even more vocal, and for his trouble has had his backer fee refunded in what appears to be an attempt to get him to shut up. This attempt has failed. He paid good money for his status as a Star Citizen 'Rear Admiral,' and he will not be silenced.

RSI has alleged that Smart is only stirring up trouble to draw attention to his own ambitious early-access space combat game, Line of Defense. This is entirely possible, but in this age of Steam Curators publicity alone is not enough to guarantee sales. Potential customers can effortlessly glean clues as to whether a game has awful graphics and mechanical designs, feeble animations, trite sound effects, buggy and incoherent menus, boring maps, drab colour palettes, unclear goals, desolate, under-populated servers, and a complete lack of soul and charm.

It's just as likely that Dr. Derek Smart (PhD) has been selflessly voicing his concerns purely out of the goodness of his heart. How else can one explain his pledge to spend up to one million US dollars of his own money to hire a team of forensic accountants untangle RSI's finances – to figure out once and for all if Star Citizen really is happening, or if a million odd space cadets have flushed their savings into a black hole.

Let us hope that Smart is worried over nothing. For if the RSI Death Star explodes, a lot of gamers are going to get hurt when its wreckage falls to Earth... 🚀

■ Dr. Derek Smart (PhD) has been even more vocal, and for his trouble has had his backer fee refunded ■

everything is still completely under control at RSI, enough time has passed from the promised Kickstarter delivery date (November 2014) for doubts to swell. Recent high-level departures have arched many a Spock cosplayer's eyebrow: executive producer Alex Maybury left in May for 'personal reasons,' and in July senior producer Travis Day left for Blizzard.

Enter George Broussard, the man who ran Duke Nukem Forever into the ground. He knows a thing or two about games that go over time, over budget, and spiral out of control, and he has revealed via Twitter that he has limited sympathy for Chris Roberts' enablers:

"You people that continue to fund Star Citizen and buy \$400 ships are



JAMES COTTEE is a victim of feature creep but will definitely be finished by 2020

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LET THE BLOOD RUN FREE



The creator of the Castlevania series recently made Kickstarter history when his fans pledged US\$5,545,991 to make *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* a reality. We caught up with **Koji Igarashi** to talk about giving the gamers what they want, and whether Konami has done a deal with the devil...



WHO KOJI IGARASHI
WHERE INTI CREATES
WHY BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

As far as Koji Igarashi is concerned, video games these days have become way too big. Their elephantine budgets are a recipe for excess, and they focus on visuals, special effects, and size rather than the essence of what makes games great. But thanks to the success of his recent Kickstarter, Mr. Igarashi is now gearing up to buck that trend.

"With *Bloodstained* I want to go back to my roots. To focus on my original passion for creating games. That's a personal theme that I have with this project. There are lots of spiritual successors in the Igavania sub-genre and many of them are some great indie-developed titles. But the one thing that I realised with the unexpected success of *Bloodstained* is that there are a lot of fans that do want me to create a new Igavania type game. I think the fans and backers also want to re-experience some of the fun that came with some of my earlier games but want me to also add to that base experience and give them something even better.

"Fans have always been very vocal so in addition to the backer comments, I have a wide variety of feedback to borrow from. This will be a much better approach. It's always better to try something new after you have a tried and true foundation to build off of than just starting 100% from scratch. This time I'll get to work with some new developers and creators as well as the backers so I fully expect to find the right balance of old and new."

By working on a new Intellectual Property, Mr. Igarashi currently finds himself in a curious position, artistically. "It's true that I am free from expectations tied to my previous IP. But am I really? I don't think anyone would be happy if I announced a Sci-fi shooting game. Probably.

"I'm sure they want a Gothic Igavania type experience. Since I left my previous



With *Bloodstained* I want to go back to my roots. To focus on my original passion for creating games

company because I wasn't being given the chance to make the sort of games my fans wanted, there are still some expectations that I feel I need to uphold. It got me thinking about how people are locked into certain paths in their life. I started thinking about cultures and the different obligations that were placed on them. That led me to the concept of the Industrial Revolution. Often times known for its brutality and division of classes. It was a time where people were locked into different paths as well. Albeit, in a very different way. It was a turning point at which faith and science also began to divide the way people thought. Alchemy was right in the middle. So it just makes sense that for someone like myself in his own personal career turning point that I base the game around a time and philosophy that was a turning point for humankind.

"But I wanted the Alchemists to symbolise how we had lost our way. They end up going down a very dark and immoral road to maintain their power. This includes experimentation on children to turn them into homing beacons for demons. The process involves fusing magic-imbued crystals into the flesh of the children. From this point I was bouncing ideas off of the designers at Inti Creates who suggested these crystals could look like Stained Glass windows due to possessing a magnetic nature that would attract other crystals of similar colour toward each other. And that's how we ended up with some of the higher plot points and visual design."

Ultimately, Mr. Igarashi wanted to come up with a system that was both expansive from an RPG-element perspective and something that justified the main character having powers and abilities. "Additionally, due to the great back and forth with Inti's designers it ended up being a great visual design that ties into the game's identity. The base idea is that you can forge magi-crystals from enemy drops and use their powers in a similar way to my previous games. You'll also be able to add sub-skills to these abilities to extend their efficiency. We are still thinking about what kind of enemy drops will give you what kind of abilities but one idea is that these could be related to certain areas of the body. For example, crystals attached to the arm could increase your strength, etc. That way you can freely customise where you want to place different magi-crystals to develop your own play style. Of course the most important thing will be making sure the game play is tight and that is one area we will focus deeply on."

As for middleware, Mr. Igarashi is currently planning to use Unreal Engine 4. "I'll be in charge of the overall design and be collaborating with Inti on the production. Of course Michiru Yamane will be doing the music



and thanks to clearing one of the stretch goals David Hayter will be doing voice. This will be a big production with lots of talented individuals working to make the best game they can." While indie projects with spread-out teams have often seen delays born of communication difficulties, Mr. Igarashi doesn't foresee any such snags for Bloodstained.

"Our combined experience and skill should make sure that even if we are distributed there won't be any issues. Of course, Inti Creates is only a train ride away and some of the staff will be in their office constantly so it's not as distributed as you might think."

But is there any danger that 3D graphics could sully the essence of the Metroidvania experience? Historically, was 3D a mistake? "It's definitely not a mistake. Definitely 2D is equally as awesome but there are some great things camera-wise and gameplay-wise that you can only do with 3D. I'm actually looking forward to showing people that it was the right choice for this title."

It's a touchy subject, but Mr. Igarashi didn't shy away from giving us his thoughts about the recent goings-on at Konami. "As an individual watching them leave the consumer game market makes me sad. I mean, it's a company that gave me a great many opportunities and helped me to become the creator I am today. And of course they have some fantastic IP too. But if you analyse their situation as a business, Konami has a much better profit margin in mobile games, casino games, and their Japan-based fitness centres. The purpose of a business is to make as much profit as possible so I really can't blame them. Sometimes, companies just die if they don't adapt to new market conditions."

"Currently the trend in Japan is free-to-play. Those games have captured the lion's share of the market and that business model has proven itself a big money-earner for game companies. But of course, there are plenty of gamers out there that feel 'free-to-play' is a way of cheating people and it just feels wrong to them. I guess one way to think about it is how digital downloads have changed the way we consume music. Many people wanted to cling on to physical media like CDs but in the end, the idea of paying per song and not really owning a physical copy is now the norm. I think that same shift may be happening to gaming between free-to-play games and normal paid games. However, I think the kind of fans and backers that would support this project definitely fall in the latter and don't want a free-to-play sectioned off experience. They want a full and robust title. Some of the more devout fans want physical disk versions and premium collectors editions. I'm just glad we can give them that via this campaign. I want many fans to be happy."

Evolving business models aside, there are some recent trends that have impressed Mr. Igarashi, like the new wave of ultra-difficult Souls-like games. "Bloodborne is amazing. I've watched my wife play it over her shoulder. It was actually the game that made her want a PS4. [Laughs]. It gives me hope that there are still opportunities for Japanese games and creators in the current market."

In parting, we felt compelled to ask whether he was aware that Australia is home to a chain of stores branded with his nickname: 'IGA.'

"I did know about this. One of my friends saw the supermarket and sent me a photo of it. I was really surprised to see it. I guess I'm more famous than I knew [laughs]." **JAMES COTTEE** 

Like Chicken

When a game challenges you to survive and then provides dark avenues for it.

In a game as detailed as RimWorld, where every item can be interacted with and used for multiple purposes, there is always a creative solution. My problem was a desperate lack of food during the harshest of boreal forest winters. The muffalo had migrated and the hydroponic rice, growing deep inside a limestone mountain, was still days from maturity. There was literally no food available. There were, however, three unsuccessful human raiders awaiting burial and freezing conveniently right outside the mountain's only exterior door. So, I ate them.

I didn't realise cannibalism was a thing the game might allow me to do, but a despairing look at the butcher table revealed a previously unchecked option for processing human meat. Cook table, too. My colonists were appalled by even seeing dead people, gaining hefty mood debuffs for every distasteful, gastronomic interaction, but they survived. The dead raiders also solved the problem I'd had in making enough cold weather parkas before the snows had set in.

I honestly haven't been this addicted to a game in a really long time. RimWorld is like Theme Hospital meets Martian Dreams, or a sci-fi, survivalist Prison Architect. It's a game so flexible and deep that all of your direst personal fictions are not only possible, but necessary. You start with three colonists who have crashed on a sparsely populated world, then use all of your future tech to build a place to survive, somewhere to defend and call home, possibly eventually a hub smart enough to plan your escape back into space.

Although you can't choose the many skills, traits and histories of your




starting survivors, you can decide to reject particularly difficult, or old, people. Just know that by not putting the slowpoke forty-eight year old into an escape pod, you are condemning her to burn in re-entry. Indeed, who are you to save the industrious optimist, who is also an amazing cook, just because she will make life on the ground somewhat easier? The game won't judge. Instead, your own imagination will slowly fill in the horrible blanks as you play.

People can do many things; construct buildings, grow plants, research, mine, shoot, socialise, cook, craft, heal and make art. Although some activities are gated, like being able to cook simple meals at level 3, fine meals at 7 and

people and don't require parkas. Not much point making beer if you've saved the teetotalers, though.

Once safely landed, survival is a matter of hauling resources to stockpiles, constructing walls/rooms/furniture, setting up a production line, organising power generation/distribution, growing crops, trading for resources, hunting, mining, a million other things and fending off periodic raiding parties/wild animals, mostly through combat. And planning for winter/summer, aliens and natural disasters/phenomena. And preventing people from going mad.

What else? Do you still dream of a spaceship and escape, returning to whatever journey you were once on, with all those nervous, lazy teetotalers? Are you now so satisfied with your organ harvesting pirate trade, endless riches seem enough? Do you want a massive population to turn into an army, to see how many years you can fend off ever more raiders to this frontier world? Are you hoping to learn its alien secrets through archeology, pioneering and brave exploration?

Me? Eating those raiders was a committal action. I'm notorious in these kinds of basebuilding games for restarting many times, ever chasing an optimal design without ever finding some conclusion. Once you go the way of the cannibal, though, you can't just quit. Currently, I'm mining and trading for plasteel at a rate that should see me safely back on my interstellar journey soon. The last raiding party, however, was surprisingly large and well equipped. Plump, too? Perhaps. We do not dwell on times past, soon to be left and forgotten on this desperate rock. 

well, put the psychopaths, cannibals and nudists into the pods

lavish meals at 12, characters will improve their skills through practice. If the person has no passion for the task, they will only learn at 30% of the base rate, which requires an interest in the pursuit. Where a burning passion for any skill is present, colonists will learn at a rate of 150%.

Additionally, there are thirteen general personality traits, including Prostophobe, Trigger-happy and Green Thumb, and twenty eight spectrum traits, which add details like whether a person is cold/warm resistant or psychically sensitive/dull. If you actually want your colony to be cannibalistic, and nudist, well, put the psychopaths, cannibals and nudists into the pods. They'll be cool about eating



MEGHANN O'NEILL
was changed irrevocably by Baldur's Gate II's skin dancers quest. Seek Jenia in Trademeet.



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A Collection Aside



How are adventure game puzzles tied to items and interaction? What makes a compelling story; dialogue, setting, intricacy or history? Who is that man in the fur-lined jacket and corporate baseball cap? **MEGHANN O'NEILL** finds answers to old questions and ruminates too hard on new ones, with this eclectic collection of experiences. This article is best enjoyed with yams, cooked rats, not raw, and a cup of tea, just the one sugar.

DUSTBOWL

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Adventure games don't have enough items. When you have a puzzle to solve, there are only so many combinations of the same few things you can poke at it. Then, if nothing works, pixel hunt until you find something new. Dustbowl, however, crams your backpack with everything from crow eyeballs and tourniquets, to ball bearings and beetles. Make explosives from tin cans, choose weapons and find a vendor who will pay well for the items you need just slightly less than water.

With everything entering and leaving your possession rapidly, nothing can be absolutely essential, like a certain food item in King's Quest 5, for example. If you ate it, perhaps as a result of its very evocative description, the game was unknowably unfinishable. Now consider The Longest Journey's rubber ducky puzzle. Some magic is lost when items are less unique, but Dustbowl handles this well. The inventory system is most like that in Quest for Glory, with a mix of consumable/craftable and quest items.

I was initially drawn to the game because of its terribly bleak pixel art, before becoming obsessed by loot. There's just something about a too skinny guy in jeans, talking with the sparse portrait of a woman in a subterranean purple bar, which grabs me. You can even count the pixels comprising empty bottles, which may be sold for cash. All things are

RELEASED



necessarily precious, postalienapocalypse, and the meagre art evokes a sense of desperate sameness.

As a new recruit for the HUB militia, you are tasked with protecting the bunker, housing a varied populace, including children and their stuffed animals. A recent earthquake has opened tunnels used by monsters, for starters. Then, you have lost contact with other survivor networks, the subway has been damaged and, generally, the world is radioactive and full of people who mean you harm. Oh, and your father has disappeared on some inexplicably secret mission and you'd like to find him.

Inside locations, this is a 2D adventure game. You may even want to draw some simple maps, as your path progresses.

Outside, you have a top-down view, which is a bit reminiscent of the original Police Quest's patrol sequences. This perspective lends the world a vastness, so you can better appreciate the apocalypse, especially given the areas impassible due to radiation. As you explore surrounding buildings, they are

crossed in red. Later, they will regenerate the random loot you continuously need.

Finding weapons, ammunition and armour allows for tackling increasingly tougher enemies, and there are a lot of them. They spawn generously in dungeons and a vulnerable part on their body may be targeted. Time your shot like a swing in a golf game, for misses, damage and critical hits. Combat works, but doesn't develop beyond this model. When injured, or tired, you must rest. You are also required to drink and eat, with special interactions, like cooking the dead rat on a stove, affording greater satiety.

Dustbowl is an astonishingly deep game. I haven't even discussed encounters with the hot dog man and crashed alien space ship yet, nor the weird cults and conundrums. Think of it as a nice way to scratch that nostalgic itch, but where it really shines is deciding what to do with something like Dubious Water. Survival is never assured. Sell it for cash? Potentially annoy the hydroponics lady by ditching it? Maybe kill all the plants? Drink it? Is there a best use for it? That it has a "best use" epitomises Dustbowl.





DREAMFALL CHAPTERS: BOOK 3

DEVELOPER RED THREAD GAMES
PRICE \$30 SEASON PASS
redthreadgames.com/games/chapters

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■ “I am a budding yam aficionado,” Kian remarks, during a complicated rat catching puzzle in Dreamfall Chapters, Book 3. Bip, the blue, Dolmari boy, who is sometimes required to help out, is not helping, despite being an excellent catcher of rats. He’s just come along to laugh at your incompetence. What is the rat for? Secrets nearly a decade old are finally beginning their slow striptease towards revelation. It’s beyond exciting. Remember the steam machines in Dreamfall’s Marcuria? Well.

I’m guessing, if you’re still reading and haven’t immediately thrown this magazine aside to play, that you’re not a long term fan of the series. Although Red Thread Games have said Dreamfall Chapters should be accessible to newcomers, there is vast richness to this current episode provided by knowing April, Zoe and Kian, as well as remembering mysteries yet unsolved. Actually, I’m not sure how you’d complete the game’s first puzzle without knowing the sequence of events in The Longest Journey, at all.



No, I’m not trying to be unwelcoming about it. It’s just that this third book is where the action really accelerates. I enjoyed the first book, really enjoyed the second and am now hanging off every word of plentiful dialogue, desperate for more. Politics, intrigue, murder, control, it is like a picture being coloured in random patches and the overall scene suddenly looks very ominous. Would I be so ridiculously excited if Dreamfall Chapters were my first touch point? Probably not.

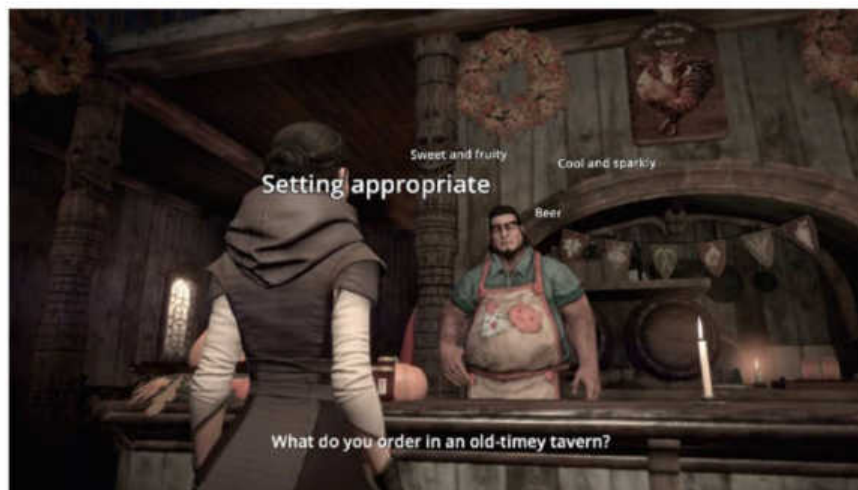
Perhaps a better question would be, is it worth starting from the beginning, to arrive where we now are? Well, beyond the intricate story and adventure-style puzzling, the series is lauded for its

representation of people. As well as the detailed female protagonists, the world has always highlighted same-sex couples and a wide cross-section of cultural backgrounds. Book 3 takes an even bolder step which challenges established understandings of player agency. I like this a lot.

Also, Dreamfall Chapters is definitely for the thinking woman. I don’t know if Red Thread received some feedback that the previous books were too easy, or something, but Book 3 is incredibly difficult. Although you can always track your goals, careful listening and thoughtfulness are required. Solutions are never “gamey”, like an arrow to show you where to go, Propastian drones aside. They are subtext, searching and connecting information together in your mind, before experimenting.

Kian takes the yams he has come to adore from a plate, leftover from Marcuria’s Autumn Festival. The passage of time between Books 2 and 3 is emphasised by details and evolving level design. In fact, our favourite rebel now has a beard and his demeanor has softened. Conversely, Zoe wears a severe haircut and seems uncharacteristically pessimistic. Of course, once you meet the drone with the sinister Australian accent and its holographic arrow, you get (more of) the picture as to why this is so.

By Chapter 8, Ulvic the Ever Thirsty is wearied by his patrons’ endless joking about the name of his establishment, The Rooster and Kitten, unburdening his frustration while completely failing to see the logo as anything other than a “nice, family friendly” piece. This innuendo is one of Dreamfall Chapters’ new in-jokes. As a standalone game, it is strong. But you could always join us from the very beginning and marvel as humour and riddles nine, maybe even sixteen, years old are laid bare. I can’t look away.





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spacerun-thegame.com

RELEASED

■ Dental plan? Buck Mann has great teeth. Buck Mann! Can you dig it? Just show me the money and I'll try not to get your fancy passengers blown off my ship, honey. (Pirates and nuclear accidents notwithstanding.) Buck Mann is, "a rugged individual, my own man, a man's man." Now, repeat that back to me in a really deep voice. Buck Mann! Sorry, I'll stop. It's just that this game's narrative really tickles me. I love it even more than the gameplay, which I love plenty enough, you'll see.

Perhaps it's the sense of implied humiliation that comes with being ex-Earth Force, winner of the Space Racing Tour three years running, lone wolf, maverick and so desperately in need of money that you'll courier horrible cargo to the outer edges of the galaxy for clearly unethical companies. A dentist isn't going to fix your being dead, after all. Or, maybe it's that Buck Mann takes himself, and his new role,

so damn seriously. Buck Mann is like Ace Rimmer meets, well, Buck Mann. What a guy!

To whom else could you entrust a motley collection of space hexes and expect the construction of a

stout gunship mid-run? Who else carries explosive packages and protects them with hastily erected turrets and shields, based on the detection of incoming threats? Space Run is an exhilarating experience. It is tower defence, real-time strategy and puzzle game, all hastily thrown together on measured journeys that are just long, and dangerous, enough to make you very insecure.

Under the logical instruction of your first officer, Addam-12, the learning curve is gentle, at least to start with. You begin by learning to build space thrusters and laser cannons. Each improvement is built on a hex and requires hexnuts, harvested with your mouse from destroyed ships and asteroids. Laser cannons must be oriented in one of six directions as you build them and cannot be re-oriented, so take note of incoming threats and the paths they will take.



Damaged improvements can be repaired with time and hexnuts, or recycle them for a smaller number than they were originally purchased for. In fact, hastily tearing down guns becomes necessary early in the game, when it is difficult to cover every orientation and threats come from multiple directions. Some, like large asteroids, can destroy hexes and smaller improvements on impact. Others only require a light peppering of well-placed fire. Beware of heavily armed, moving pirates, though.

Essentially, the faster you get to your destination, the more credits you earn. These buy possible upgrades, like missile launchers and twin blasters, for twice the firepower. Forcefields and ion cannons lend an FTL-like feel to forward planning, too. When you are required to transport people, they need a power generator. Or, take along a mechanic to construct extra containers for more pay, if you can risk wasting hexes perhaps better fitted with offensive upgrades.

Reputation accumulates based on how quickly you complete missions and how much cargo is intact. Five courier companies can be unlocked, providing a range of jobs and hilarious banter with Buck Mann. The unique blend of gameplay elements in Space Run never stops being fun, and play is well supported by the storyline, art and music. Now, if you will excuse me, Buck Mann has important alien crystals to deliver. Smoke me a kipper, I'll be back for breakfast.





HER STORY

MADE FOR SAM BARLOW
PRICE \$7
www.herstorygame.com

■ It's been a while since I've spent days scouring the internet for more information after finishing a game. I think the last time was in 2006, thanks to Dreamfall and that amazing cliffhanger, oddly enough. I'm having immense trouble writing this page on Her Story, because I keep leaving to read spoiler discussions. Also, seeing as how I haven't "completed" the game, although it is definitely "finished", filling in one little blank seems maddeningly important. I may be missing literally one word. Or none.

Before I started, I thought the game's title suggested specific content or a narrative theme. Then, I forgot all about that. Now, I think "Her Story" may imply something radically different. In a way that is structurally similar to Gillian Flynn's novel, *Gone Girl*, a perception of events is incrementally twisted until your initial assumptions seem ridiculous. It is a tale told in video grabs, as testimony. You direct the sequence of its telling by searching for keywords.

Although this may be expected to play out in a less linear fashion, when compared to a novel, if you search, "blueberries",

RELEASED

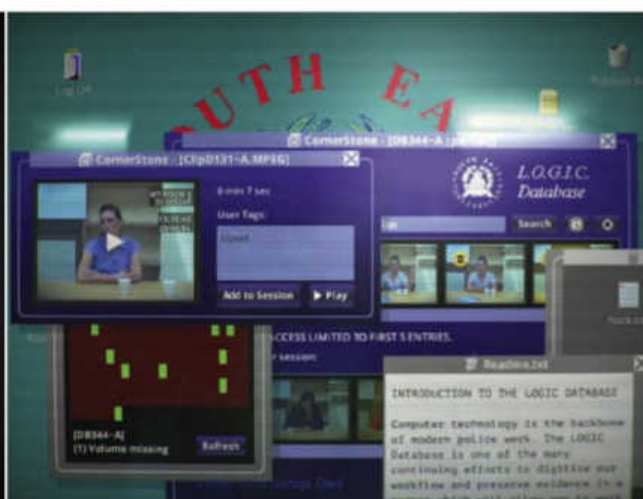
there might be 57 times the person has mentioned such a fruit, but you can only access the first five, as designated by designers. If you search, "blueberries pirate", you could narrow it down to six, but one video is still obscured. You can definitely guess ahead of yourself, but there is a loosely intended path to follow, justified by the apparent strictures of the older technology used.

You likely won't want to type random words for a long while, though. If a name is mentioned, you'll want to know more about that person immediately. Initially, there is a glut of intriguing clues. Knowing what to search for tapers off very rapidly towards the end, but well after the narrative hooks are planted. There is a grid which indicates how many more moments there are to discover in the database or you can decide when enough is enough.

Indeed, the reason the footage is so

scrambled seems to be due to some combination of Y2K and a flood. Further, the analysis provided by the case's detective has been lost, although you do learn some details of his life in a seemingly incidental fashion. This structure makes for a story that is maddeningly incomplete but also abundantly enjoyable. I envy you, and that you haven't played this yet, because this is a one-way journey, a tale you can hear only once.

Of course, Her Story did leave me with an unquenchable and enduring curiosity. I know both that my reaction is common, but that it left other players with a sense that the experience was tied up in a neat package. Regardless, this is carefully crafted and compelling game. The interactivity is only light, but it is enough to make you feel invested and clever, when you find what you are looking for. So, settle in and hear this testimony from a beginning, ending only when you are satisfied you understand it.



10 to Watch



LIFE IS FEUDAL

DEVELOPER BITBOX LTD.
PUBLISHER BITBOX LTD.
DUE EARLY ACCESS
www.lifeisfeudal.com

Life is Feudal is a crazy ambitious game. It's not a game that can be labelled simply under a category like "sandbox" or "survival" because it's aiming to be all that and more. It's aiming to be a whole Feudal history world, with mechanics for everything - farming, bunting, crafting, building, physics based combat, sieges, cooking, mining, and pretty much anything else you can think of. Bitbox Ltd. are essentially trying to create a living world populated by players doing anything and everything they have to exist in a medieval world.



THE SEED

DEVELOPER MISERY DEVELOPMENT LTD.
PUBLISHER MISERY DEVELOPMENT LTD.
DUE 2015
mdtseed.com

Falling somewhere between a visual novel, an RPG and a survival simulator, The Seed is shaping up to be a really bleak experience. In August 2015 a global nuclear war begins and by January 2016, mankind is almost extinct. The game begins in 2026. 11 years after the war began, what's left of humanity exists in scattered micro-communities, some benevolent, some predatory. How do you survive? Is it with a group, looking out for the common good, do you go it alone? What are your survival priorities? Can you make the hard choices, and still maintain your moral and ethical stance? Probably not.

SHAQ FU: A LEGEND REBORN

DEVELOPER BIG DEEZ PRODUCTIONS
PUBLISHER BIG DEEZ PRODUCTIONS
DUE 2015
www.alegendreborn.com

There are many legendarily bad games in the world, but the original Shaq Fu is definitely one that stands out from the rest of the garbage pile, thanks to poor design, poor implementation and a wrongheaded idea at the core. That said, we're really looking forward to the crowdfunded sequel, as it seems to have its tongue planted where it should be and its heart in the right place. Shaq returns to kick some bad guy arse in what is being described as a cross between Final Fight and Street Fighter.



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SHELTERED

DEVELOPER UNICUBE
PUBLISHER TEAM 17
DUE TBA
www.unicube.net/sheltered

Fallout Shelter has been taking the world by storm since its surprise release at E3, charming players with tongue in cheek survival strategy and bunker building. Now imagine a similar game with all of the humour excised and tongue swollen and hanging out of mouth due to dehydration and the early stages of radiation poisoning. It's a bleak game of survival as a mother, father, son, daughter and pet try to eke out some form of life in a fallout shelter, scavenging for supplies, trying to contact other survivors and doing what can be done to make life underground comfortable. It's base building by way of When the Wind Blows.



THE ESCAPISTS: THE WALKING DEAD

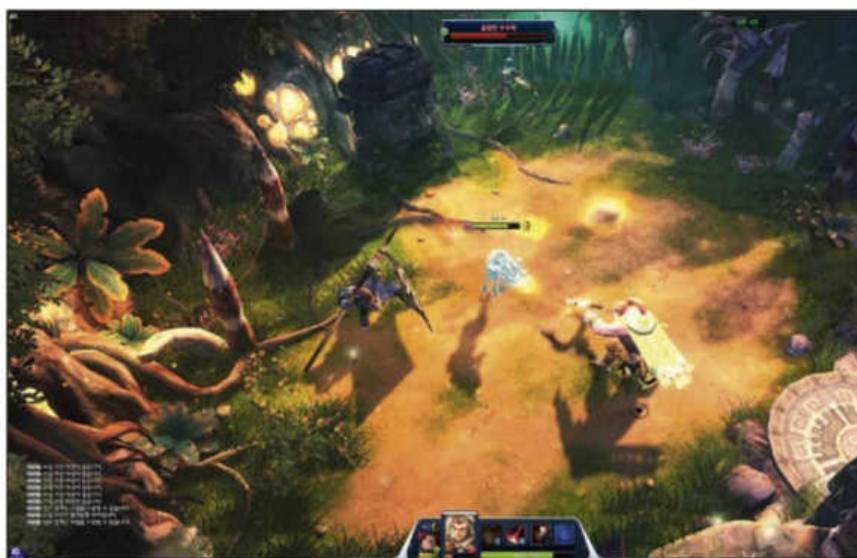
DEVELOPER TEAM 17, SKYBOUND ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER TEAM 17
DUE 2015
www.team17.com/the-escapists-the-walking-dead

Escaping from a prison is one thing, but escaping from the ravenous hordes of the walking dead is another thing entirely. Following the timeline of the books, The Escapists: The Walking Dead sees players stepping into the boots and tiny hat of 8-bit Rick Grimes, first escaping the hospital in which he wakes and then from a series of levels that see the post zombie apocalyptic lawman have to guide a group of survivors to the escape. What we've played so far isn't mechanically too different from The Escapists, with crafting and watching for patterns both forming a major part of gameplay, but the zombie theme really adds to the tone of the game.

MASTER X MASTER

DEVELOPER NCSoft
PUBLISHER NCSoft
DUE SEPTEMBER
mxm.plaync.com

Something akin to a MOBA by way of MMO, Master X Master is the latest free to play game from the Korean developer NCsoft. In it players take control of a party of heroes that can be switched between (with a long cooldown) to face different situations or to perform Marvel Vs Capcom style character combo attacks and battle their way through both PvE and PvP content. Aside from the fact that the game will contain 25 maps worth of PvE encounters, Master X Master stands out from the pack thanks to the control scheme that sees WASD used for movement, the ability to dodge and active mouse aiming for skills.



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HEARTHSTONE: THE GRAND TOURNAMENT

DEVELOPER BLIZZARD
PUBLISHER BLIZZARD
DUE AUGUST
thegrandtournament.com

We know we really don't have to point out that Hearthstone is a great game. If Blizzards numbers are correct, pretty much everyone with a phone, tablet or PC is dabbling in their hugely addictive card game. What we are pointing out is how great their next expansion is looking. A grand, tongue in cheek tournament with knights of all races and creeds, including pirates and Murlocks (and hopefully pirate Murlocks), coming together to battle beasts and each other to prove their valour. The expansion will feature 132 new cards and new mechanics to go along with them.



SKYSHINE'S BEDLAM

DEVELOPER SKYSHINE GAMES
PUBLISHER VERSUS EVIL
DUE SEPTEMBER
www.gobedlam.com

It's the post apocalyptic future and, as you would expect, the world is pretty much screwed. The city of Byzantine stands as a technological marvel in the wastelands of Bedlam, a blasted desert home to mutants, cyborgs, rogue AI and other assorted baddies that inevitably pop up after the fall of man. Players take the role of the Mechanic, the mysterious captain of a battle train/tank thing called a Dozer, making its way across the wasteland to the mythical paradise of Aztec City. Each move in this turn based Rogue-like sees the Dozer and its crew facing dangers, meeting NPCs and getting one step closer to their goal.

SPIRE

DEVELOPER HITBOX TEAM
PUBLISHER HITBOX TEAM
DUE 2015
spiregame.com

The next game from the team behind the wonderful but criminally underplayed Dustforce is a change of pace as far as the mechanics go, but in design philosophy it definitely sounds like a spiritual sequel. An FPS that sees players ascending a constantly changing tower, Spire will feature a movement system that will demand multiple masteries from players rather than just the ability to move and shoot. The procedurally generated levels will feature numerous obstacles, both environmental and antagonistic, requiring players to shoot, slide, wall run, jump and more to get to the top.



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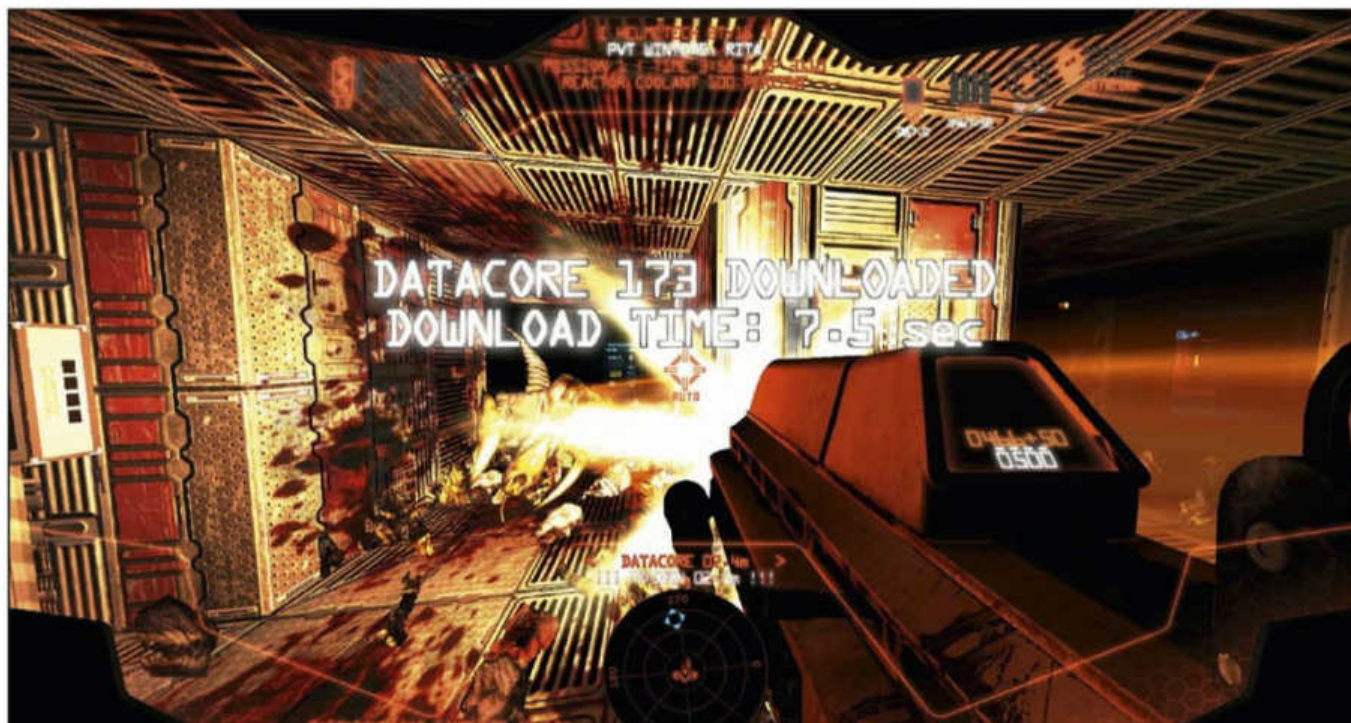
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BATTLE READY



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SPACE BEAST TERROR FRIGHT

DEVELOPER NORNWARE AB

PUBLISHER NORNWARE AB

DUE EARLY ACCESS

www.nornware.com

Aside from having the kind of awesomely terrible name you can't help but love, Space Beast Terror Fright also combines the best (and some of the worst) bits of 90s gaming into a thoroughly entertaining whole. This Rogue-like, permadeath FPS sees players stepping into the armour of space marines heading into procedurally generated ships to hunt down swarms of aliens, find keys to unlock doors, activate sentries and hack consoles. Guns spew hundreds of bullets, the HUD is incredibly busy and four player can play local split screen co-op. Bliss.



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[THE RISE (AND FALL?) OF STARCRAFT]

The once undisputed king of competitive gaming is on the decline.
PATRICK STAFFORD investigates.

The name “Day9” is easily recognisable to anyone familiar with the eSports scene – and even to some who aren’t. The seemingly random name is the online handle used by Sean Plott, widely recognised as one of the nicest and most helpful personalities in professional gaming.

Plott is a StarCraft man. Most of his good reputation comes from the amount of effort he’s put into teaching new players the ropes for this incredibly complex game – a game often jokingly referred to as South Korea’s national sport. Plott has built his entire happy-go-lucky personal brand around StarCraft, which has allowed him to leverage himself into a media network with new types of shows. His personal website sells shirts with his logo.

But Plott isn’t as much of a StarCraft man as he used to be. Over the past few years, StarCraft II – at one point the stuff of rumours in 2007 – hasn’t gained the traction of its predecessor.

“I used to do a show called Funday Monday, where people would submit replays of them playing StarCraft II with just significant and ridiculous constraints,” he says. Restrictions like only being able to build flying units, or only workers. It was just a bit of fun.

“I used to get huge viewership numbers for them – 20,000 every Monday. But over time, that’s dwindled down. Not just the number of viewers, but the number of entries.”

“I finally just said I’m going to stop doing it.”
His declining viewer numbers are reflective



of a larger shift. After 17 years of dominating eSports, StarCraft is declining. Alongside Plott, other professional gaming leagues such as Team Liquid have seen a marked drop in the number of StarCraft spectators. In 2010-12, events could see as many as 150,000 spectators. Today, you can count spectators in the tens of thousands.

It's hardly a death sentence, but StarCraft isn't just losing viewers – it's losing players. The past five years have seen professional players including Lee "MarineKing" Jung Hoon, Sasha Hostyn and "BabyKnight" jump ship.

"No game stays popular forever," says Jared "PiG" Krensel, a professional StarCraft player based in Australia – he's a part of the Exile5 team.

"One day, many years from now, I will probably have to swap to something else."

"StarCraft is such a great game, so the thought does sadden me."

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Let's rewind.

While other real-time strategy games were

It's hardly a death sentence, but StarCraft isn't just losing viewers – it's losing players

popular in the late 1990s, StarCraft became differentiated through an elegant balance. Three races, with an intense amount of effort put into making sure none had any unfair advantages over the others.

South Korea, with its advanced internet infrastructure for the time, became the perfect breeding ground. In 2000, the country even created an official group to monitor the game's professional events – the Korea e-Sports Association. Soon, television channels were showing matches complete with commentary and analysis.

Just as the original StarCraft enjoyed its rise due to a growing hunger for broadband, StarCraft II started the decade well with the sudden rise in streaming technology.

"Because of StarCraft's huge

popularity as a casual single-player game and popular LAN party game all around world...as well as its eSports background it was possibly the most anticipated game release of all-time," says Krensel.

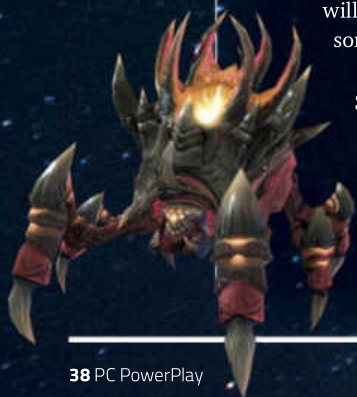
"All of this led to an immense wave of hype and excitement around StarCraft II's release. Combine the timing of this with widespread HD capabilities for YouTube content and the advent of Justin.tv – later Twitch, you get a perfect storm for StarCraft II's immense success and hype."

Plott agrees streaming was certainly StarCraft's "biggest contributor" to success.

"It was the first huge game that had a lot of big interest," he says. "Counter Strike was an extremely cool game but wasn't absorbed into streaming culture."

Streaming is largely responsible for the huge spectator numbers in various StarCraft events – hundreds of thousands of people watching tournaments was not out of the ordinary.

But that's changed. Spectators are down. The players are leaving. And people like Plott are focusing their



attention on other games. StarCraft's days at the centre of the eSports scene are over.

Now, League of Legends and DOTA have taken its place. Each year, spectators and prize money grow for these two games based off a once-modestly beloved mod for Warcraft III. But why?

WHAT IS OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Genres, like the hands of a clock, come back around. Whether it's boy bands or skinny ties, everything that has happened will happen again. So it is in games. Styles that died in the 90s – like flight sims – are making a solid resurgence.

Of all the games to take over from StarCraft's dominance, another real-time strategy title is not the most obvious – the genre mostly died in the late 1990s. So why are StarCraft's two main successors as the centre of the eSports scene – DOTA and League of Legends – so successful?

"The world has changed in terms of what defines a game," says StarCraft: Legacy of the Void producer Chris Sigarty. "A lot more people have access to games now and consider themselves gamers as opposed to when people were buying RTS games in the late 1990s."

"It's chic to be a geek now," he says.

That explains the popularity, perhaps. League of Legends and DOTA are both certainly winning on that front. In January 2014, LoL said it has 67 million active monthly players, and last year's DOTA 2 International tournament had a prize pool of \$US10 million.

But why is the battle for popularity among strategy games, which are notoriously difficult to learn?

The first is obvious – spectatorship. The game's format makes it easy to understand why professional players became caught in its gravity. Watching a StarCraft match – with an overhead view of the battlefield – is fun. You can see all the action at once. Unlike a first person shooter, for example, when only one person's view is available at a time.

The second reason is just as clear – socialisation.

"StarCraft is the Tennis of eSports – it's never going to have the accessibility of an easier to understand and more social football," says Krensel.

"Also in an age where games are so good at linking up players with

friends and even old Blizzard titles like Warcraft III from 2000 had built in clans and clan ladders, a meaningful levelling system and in-client tournaments – all which promoted the community."

"StarCraft 2 failed to deliver any of these features on release of the game, and subsequent updates were often lacking."

This is something even Blizzard acknowledges. The release of Blizzard's own MOBA and competitor to both DOTA and League of Legends, Heroes of the Storm, has come with a commitment for post-launch support.

"One of the things that's very real that the players who participate in StarCraft II, they are in it for the long haul," says Sigarty.

"They've openly said they want things to buy that we can give back into the game. The community is asking for features like skins so they can continue to not just get better but demonstrate more, show more."

"That's something we've thought about it, what about after the launch of Legacy of the Void, to continue to allow the game to evolve."

The lack of a casual StarCraft base may have hurt its competitive success in the long-run, argues Plott. Consider the most popular professional sports – football, tennis, soccer, among them. All of these games have amateur leagues in every suburb. Grab a ball or a racket and get started.

StarCraft, on the other hand, combines a certain set of finely-tuned skills and doesn't have much of a draw to newer players. On a basic level, people know how to kick a ball in a goal. Maximising a digital economy – and an army at the same time – is much, much harder. StarCraft is often compared to chess – but it's a chess game in which both players are making their moves at the same time.

"I think the thing StarCraft 2 struggles with is how difficult it is to just sit down and play in a casual way," says Plott.

"A lot of the strategy has to do with timing, ordering these types of buildings and upgrades that has the exact stuff you need to defend yourself."

"If a new player suddenly loses, it feels like there's no possible way that player could overcome that. He says, 'fuck this', in terms of that learning loop."



Jared "PiG" Krensel at the 2012 StarCraft II World Championship Series: Oceania Finals



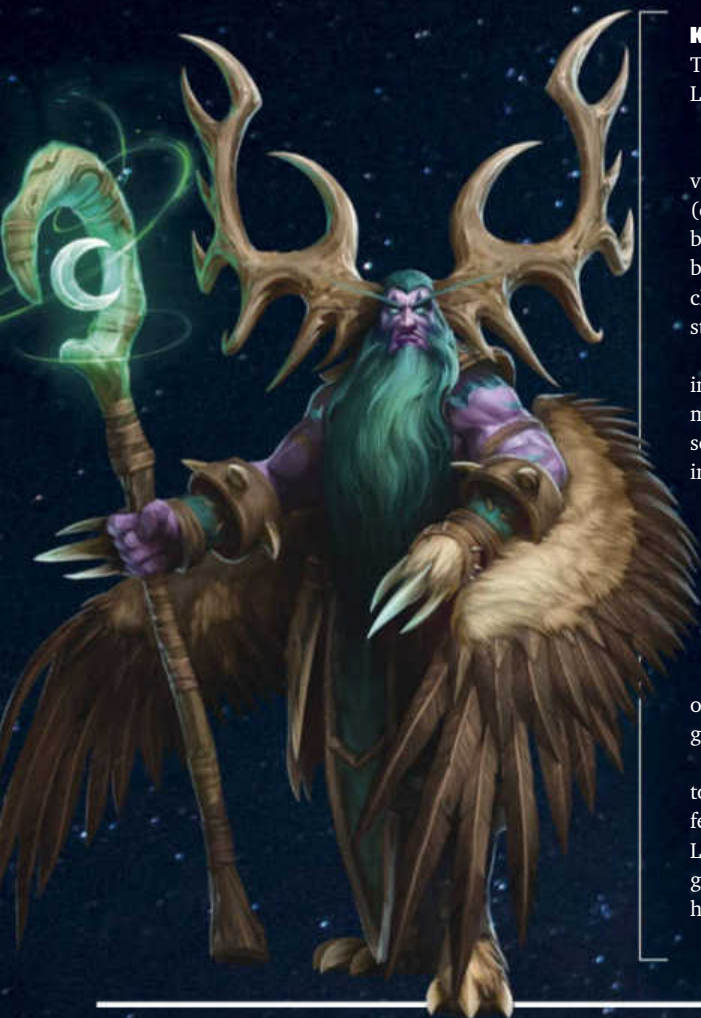
Competitive League of Legends



Competitive DOTA 2



Heroes of the Storm



K.I.S.S.

There's a simpler reason why League of Legends and DOTA are taking over.

They're just far simpler to play.

While both games feature a huge variety of heroes, weapons and skills, (each involving a specific knowledge base), the function of the game is basically the same. Move your one character around the board and kill stuff using your four weapons or spells.

StarCraft, on the other hand, involves an entirely different set of management skills. As Plott describes, so much of the balance of the game involves building specific buildings or upgrades at very precise timings. Otherwise, you're screwed.

"MOBAs capture a small of part of [strategy] without dealing with economies and building bases," says Krensel. "It's one of the reasons you see a lot of tower defence games on mobile – because you don't have to get too complicated."

As with most things when it comes to player reaction, it all comes down to feedback loops. Plott says in League of Legends, or other MOBAs, players are given immediate feedback as to what happens when they die.

"It's the same in Counter Strike," he

says. "You walk around a corner, get shot. Then you know to be careful."

"There is a tightness to learning loops in other games that isn't quite there in StarCraft."

The massive variety of strategic tactics in StarCraft mean that loop is incredibly complicated and difficult to interpret. New players are encouraged to share their game replays with experts and routinely watch practice matches with better players.

It's a time commitment.

"It may take multiple games to exercise that learning loop," says Plott. "I think that almost everyone who plays StarCraft seriously watches competitive StarCraft, and if that number is going down over time, it's very hard."

That isn't to say MOBAs aren't strategic, he says.

"They're deeply, wildly, strategic," he says. "Those core gameplay loops are so tight."

Which is probably why Blizzard is getting on board with Heroes of the Storm.

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

There's another key theory why StarCraft is losing to MOBA titles – the rise of free to play gaming.

After the Global Financial Crisis occurred in 2008, the video game industry was shaken up. Companies like THQ suffered the brunt of the downfall, and certainly the Australian scene was decimated. Unemployment rose around the world.

That coincided with the rise of the Apple App Store, and access to small, bite-sized games that people would expect to get for free.

That free-to-play mentality seeped into desktop games. Hence, League of Legends and DOTA are completely free products. If there's one way to gain a sizeable player base? Give it away for nothing.

It's a cynical view. But if nothing else, it's caused Blizzard to respond with Heroes of the Storm.

"These games entire money-making model is based on microtransactions, which only a small % of players purchase - so the entire business success rests on many players playing - hence the companies have revolutionised community involvement, game updates and patches and general attention towards maintaining and refreshing the game as a fun and new experience," says Krensel.

"StarCraft on the other hand follows the older model based on a one-off initial purchase - and past that point their involvement with the game and its community is something that serves them no purpose monetarily."

"This creates a large barrier to entry - you couldn't initially just ask your friend to try out StarCraft unless they were willing to spend the 60 or so dollars needed to purchase the game."

As Sigarty himself explains, Blizzard isn't trying to revolutionise MOBAs. (Indeed, playing it safe ensures a greater chance of competing against DOTA and League of Legends).

"But we are trying to come up with something that...comes from a lot of interaction with the community," he says. "We want Heroes to have an unexpected tone to it."

Unexpected or not, Blizzard's entry into the race confirms the context of eSports is changing for StarCraft. If the game really *is* the closest digital equivalent to chess, then the industry has found its football in MOBA. As one of the biggest gaming companies on the planet, Blizzard would be negligent to avoid the opportunity.

"When seen in contrast to these huge

MOBA businesses with hundreds of millions of players throwing money at them - Blizzards level of maintenance on SC2 will pale in comparison," says Krensel.

And there are some early signs Blizzard's approach is rubbing off on the competition. Both LoL and DOTA have recently made changes to the way towers behave in the game to make match lengths shorter. Heroes of the Storm has already made a mark among the MOBA base for its shorter match times.

Strategy games, then, are become less about strategy and more about action. Faster. Punchier.

We're already seeing this type of change move over to StarCraft. In the next expansion, Legacy of the Void, players will start with twice as many "worker" units. Less time to get your economy going means more time for action.

A DIVERSE FUTURE FOR EVERYONE

It would be easy to sensationalise this type of shift. To say that StarCraft, which has been the eSports darling for 17 years, is dying. But it isn't. In fact, it's about to get another boost with the next expansion.

"StarCraft is very stable and if LoTV shares similar levels of popularity to HoTS then it

will continue as a strong eSport for at least a few more years," says Krensel.

"Even if it's a bit less popular, or even far less popular there will always be SC2 competitions and a good-sized player-base."

And for players and commentators like Plott, more games means more eyes on eSports as a whole. Hell, DOTA caused a minor controversy this year when ESPN broadcast its championships - and pissed off a commentator who thought the screen should be reserved for "real" sports.

"I run my own StarCraft coaching business, Stream as a partner on Twitch regularly and have recently forayed into commentary and expert analysis at major events."

"if one day many years from now StarCraft is too unpopular for me to earn my living, I'll hopefully have found a new Strategy game to love, and swap over to that."

Plott isn't too worried, either.

"I've always known that diversification is important," he says. "I've always played other games, it's felt natural, I feel like there would be a stress for someone all in on StarCraft."

One thing is for certain - StarCraft may be on the downhill run. But ultimately, everyone in eSports will benefit from its legacy, long into the future. **PC**

playing it safe ensures a greater chance of competing against DOTA and League of Legends



2012 StarCraft II
World Championship
Series: Oceania Finals

MASTER & COMMANDER

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH takes to the high seas in the World of Warships beta.

World of Warships

DEVELOPER WARGAMING.NET
PUBLISHER WARGAMING.NET
DUE 2015
worldofwarships.asia

So here I am, cruising through the eastern straight on one of the more challenging maps in World of Warships. It's a passage that must always be contested, because it's effectively a path straight into your own territory – where your own heavy and somewhat slower carriers tend to be.

You almost never see battleships here, but fast and agile destroyers love it. They can dash in, and fire off a spread of torpedoes. In the narrows, they can be hard to dodge.

In this instance, I'm in a mid-weight cruiser, a Cleveland class ship with four turrets mounting three medium calibre guns each. It's fast and sleek, and can put serious hurt on a destroyer. Except... there are two of them, and another cruiser, and I only have another destroyer from my own side for support. Do I rush in, and hope I can avoid getting

caught in a torpedo crossfire? Do I slow down, stand-off, and hope my superior gunnery can even the odds against the smaller ships? Or do I fall back entirely, amongst the line of battleships to the rear?

Regardless, I need to make a decision soon – I'll be torpedo range about... now!

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

World of Warships recently went from closed beta testing to its open beta phase, and if you're at all interested in naval warfare in the age of battleships, it's an almost essential game to play. Its battles are tense affairs, complete with hulking battleships and aircraft carriers capable of ruling the skies – and punishing the surface combatants down below. Of fast destroyers weaving in and out of heavy cannon fire to deliver a well-timed torpedo salvo, and of cruisers waiting for their moment to strike and swarm a weakened foe.

Like all of Wargaming's recent titles, one of things that keeps you coming back to the game is slow pace of upgrading and unlocking new vessels. In the open beta there are only the Japanese and American fleets, but that's still nearly sixty vessels to explore. You can purchase upgrades for each that increase turret turn rate, or even improve repair times, and you can even mount camouflage on your mighty beasts of the sea. From here into full release, the game will only get better.

Fair warning, though: if you do get into the beta now, be prepared to lose everything that you unlock. That's what happened during the transition from close to open beta, to level the playing field, and it'll surely happen when the game officially releases. That said, if you buy a premium ship with bought Gold, you keep that, and veteran players will likely get a special premium ship for their time helping out during testing.

ROCK, PAPER, BATTLESHIP

There's a very definite element of rock-scissor-paper to the game, with battleships being great at taking out cruisers, cruisers great at taking out destroyers, and destroyers being pretty handy at heavily hurting battleships, but any ship is capable of being effective in a variety of roles. Battleships are the heaviest units, with the biggest guns and the heaviest armour. Destroyers are fast, and their torpedoes are very effective, but the ships are fragile. Cruisers sit in between in nearly every way, and aircraft carriers are like playing a whole other game, something more like an RTS, as you vector your squadrons over a top down map.

The mechanics of the game's combat are much richer though. Detailed armour mapping makes picking your targets a priority, and you can destroy individual guns, knock out engines, or even



Battleships are the king of the seas! Except for carriers. And destroyer swarms. And...



"Tor-pe-dos... AWAY!"

World of Warships is a game not just about blowing stuff up, it's a game about tactical decision-making



cripple a ship's steering. And, of course, if you cause a penetrating hit to a ship's magazine... that's all she wrote.

THE PACE IS THE TRICK

Like many games, World of Warships is a game not just about blowing stuff up, it's a game about tactical decision-making. But unlike World of Tanks, or many other shooters, the slower pace of World of Warships renders those decisions even more important. If you find yourself in a poor position, getting out of it's going to take time – momentum is a harsh mistress, and these ships, even the destroyers, do not turn on a dime. The near-constant motion, and the fact that accelerating and decelerating all take precious time, means you not only need to think about your current position, but where it's going to take you in a few seconds or even minutes.

Get out of position even briefly – say, into range of two or three battleships – and it could very quickly be 'game over' in a short amount of time.

What's been particularly interesting



to watch is the way real naval tactics have started to come to the fore in the game, even though it's now only in open beta (ahead of a release, we'd guess, in a month or so's time). Carriers send flights of torpedo bombers in search of their enemy counterparts, while darting destroyers rush between lines of battleships and cruisers. Players have quickly learned that sticking together is essential, so even on maps with multiple capture points, fleets tend to

stick together. This lets you concentrate fire on targets, and acts as a force multiplier for anti-aircraft capacity.

All of this, and we've not even seen the whole depth of the British, German, and Russian tech trees yet. World of Warships is looking to be a great addition to Wargaming's free-to-play line-up. It's certainly a game we're having trouble staying away from... and I am so close to unlocking my next cruiser! **DAVID HOLLINGWORTH PC**

ESPORTS ON THE HIGH SEAS?

World of Tanks is a huge thing in eSports, with yearly, global championships drawing hundreds of teams to compete for some pretty mega cash prizes. Wargaming's aiming for the same thing with World of Warships, which, having now played a lot of the game... it's pretty curious. The slower pace doesn't seem like it could hold a crowd the same way Tanks does, but we'd be happy to be proved wrong.

THE SCIENCE OF FUN

BENNETT RING discovers how Wargaming.net is using psychophysiology to crack the code of how we have fun.

PC PowerPlay recently flew half way around the world to check out World of Warships, at the St Petersburg base set up by Wargaming.net. While we didn't see anything that isn't already in the beta, we did stumble upon one of the most fascinating new fields in game development – User Experience. This is the science of optimising the player's enjoyment, from the moment they enter their login details, to the time they're watching their foe making their fiery exit in the big blue sea. Player's reactions are monitored right down to their heart rate, body temperature and even "mental load." We sat down with **Anton Artemov**, Head of the Interaction Development Department, to hear just how he's figuring out the science of fun.

PCPP: What does Interaction Development cover?

Anton: To set up and drive all of the user experience from the time they push the play button. Camera conception, control, meta UI, graphical user interface, heads up display. All that stuff. Also, how people enter the game, how they progress, how they learn to play, all that stuff. Everything that we can call the "human interface".



What background do you need for this?

I have three Masters Degrees – one in fine arts, one in linguistics, and finally psychophysiology. I've been designing User Interfaces for more than ten years.

How do you measure the effectiveness of the interface designs? How do you test the prototypes?

We have a lab here, where we measure the real time activity of players. We have several data streams that we measure and process. We had to calculate some kind of specific coordinate system when talking about mental loads and effectiveness. In previous projects we used to use sensors such as heart rate, and different kinds of sensors. However, when you are sitting and playing whilst wired up, it's not a real activity. That's why we use the calculation of the mental load. Mental load is just for this project. If we want to transfer this to a different project, we'd have to redevelop our measuring system.

How do you calculate mental load?

It's the secret!

Is it measured by physiological reactions, or by questioning the user?

We don't ask them questions... well we do talk to them but what people say is just



■ ■ We can compare mental load to game events, and then we analyse it with math. It's just normal psychophysiological studies ■ ■

subjective. We are obsessed with the objective information. That's why we have several data streams. We can compare mental load to game events, and then we analyse it with math. It's just normal psychophysiological studies, with game telemetry. Yet we don't use sensors at the moment – we use cameras and different types of analysis. For instance we use the motion microscope, and can count the blood pressure, which can then be used to calculate heart rate.

With this data, what are you aiming to achieve? For example, if you see mental load is high, is your goal to decrease that load via the user interface?

We want people to make tactical decisions. Not to hesitate. It's all about the conception of how the user interface is designed. It's all about the learning, but the learning is presented each time that you play. Even if you have several thousand battles played, you are still learning. That makes this game very interesting from my point of view. This game is never the same.

How do you keep it fresh for thousands of hours?

We're don't give the gamer everything we have in the game at once. We make the mental scheme, and in accordance with his type of thinking and decision making process, he goes through the upgrade path that way. But it's his decision, not ours – we just provide the field of possibilities and abilities, with no straight lines.





What did you learn from past games?

Because of our past two games, we know what works and what doesn't. We have a good basis to improve ideas. World of Tanks has a specific User Experience, we knew that people playing WoT will try World of Warships – so we have to find the right balance between the WoT stereotypes with the usual gamer stereotypes who play shooters and other genres. It was quite a challenging task not to have the User Interface from WoT, but to improve it so that everybody else could play Warships.

What are some interesting player behaviours you've noticed?

It's interesting to have the empirical confirmation of something that everybody knows, but can't say from what it consists of. For instance, everybody says some gameplay feature is interesting – but what do they actually mean? From what blocks does this consist of? We try to find the answer and solve that. It's also based on culture – for one culture something might be interesting, yet for another culture that same thing is not interesting.

(At this point Anton fires up a huge PDF file showing how different cultures – such as Russian, American or British – put different emphasis on different things, such as teamwork, or feeling powerful, or even simply winning a match. It's fascinating stuff, but Anton sadly can't share the document publicly).

How do you ensure a single game satisfies so many different cultures?

That's why we have the field of abilities.

So you notice that different cultures take different paths through the ability tree?

Yep. To simplify what I'm saying, we built the interactive environment, and give the players the tools to work with that. It then depends on them as to what they do with these tools. Everybody has the same tools, but they use them in completely different ways.

World of Warships is now in public beta – head over to www.worldofwarships.asia/ to sign up.



Beyond Eyes

The player leading the blind

DEVELOPER TIGER & SQUID
PUBLISHER SURPRISE ATTACK
DUE 2015
www.beyondeyes-game.com

Beyond Eyes initially started as a graduation project for a bachelor's degree in game design but transformed into a three and a half year solo labour of love for designer Sherida Halatoo before the title was picked up by indie games publisher Team 17 last year and given a budget and team. Much like the majority of development, the game is a solitary affair. The game's protagonist, Rae, is a 10-year-old girl. When Rae was younger, an accident involving fireworks left her blinded and scarred physically and emotionally. Stripped of her sight, Rae began to fear the world outside of her comfort zone, avoiding public places and quivering at loud noises. She became socially isolated and withdrawn, preferring to stay in her garden. One day, she meets a new friend – a neighborhood cat that comes by to play. The cat is the closest

friend Rae has had in years, but when her friend vanishes one day, Rae must find the courage to finally break her isolation and explore more of the world.

As Rae wasn't born blind, she has some sense of how things look and a child's imagination, so the world around her is painted in bright colours and idealised depictions of life. The visuals have a soft, watercolor-like quality to them that seem to capture a sort of idyllic representation of childhood and familiar things, but these visuals never fill the screen entirely – there is always bright white space surrounding Rae, conveying to the player that she cannot grasp the entirety of her surroundings like a person with perfect sight would. When things like rain create a lot of noise that clogs out other things, the area begins to shrink. If she starts to feel scared or uncomfortable, the warm

white surroundings transition into a cold, worrisome black. Rae starts moving more slowly when worried, and the world starts losing some detail as she focusses in on the threat.

Rae's sense of hearing is sharp but it is also somewhat unreliable due to her idealised memories of what the world looked like when she could see. The sound of running water could immediately fill in the world with a beautiful fountain or a babbling brook when in reality she is approaching a water main or storm water drain. Only when her other senses come into play – smell and touch primarily – is the picture more fully revealed.

The two levels we've had the chance to play so far – both essentially working as tutorials – didn't exactly have much in the way of what most people would consider traditional gameplay, with Rae slowly making her



way around, the world pained in like a watercolour around her, filling in small details and drawing out the path that needs to be followed. Birds chirp, water flows, another little girl points to her ball and calls out to Rae, but rather than having them as interactive elements, Beyond Eyes is instead content, at least in what we played, to use these events and features to enliven the soundscape and palette of a blind girl's world. Even without any particularly gamey features, Beyond Eyes is shaping up to be a unique and quite affecting experience and we're looking forward to getting our hands on the final code. **PC**

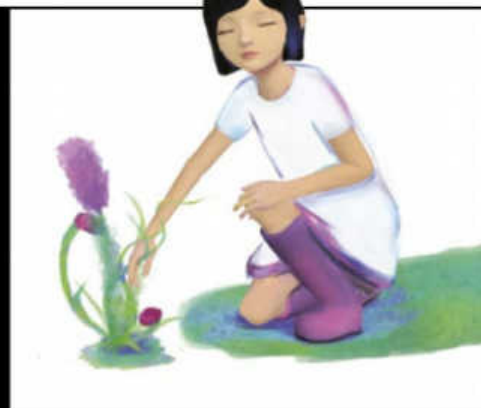


Alfred Hitchcock experimented with watercolour before he died



* death metal voice* LIKE MY SOOOUUUUULLLLL

■■ The sound of running water could immediately fill in the world with a beautiful fountain or a babbling brook ■■



TOUCHING

The code we played didn't feature any real interaction with the outside world, with Rae exploring but not really affection the world around her. We're not sure if this will be the case with the final game or not. If Rae does interact with the people and animals she meets the experience should be much more fulfilling than the beautiful; but otherwise kind of hollow code we played.

Squad

Redefining realistic shooters.

DEVELOPER OFFWORLD INDUSTRIES
PUBLISHER OFFWORLD INDUSTRIES
DUE 2016
joinsquad.com

Over the last decade, Project Reality has grown to become one of the most popular mods for Battlefield 2. The incredibly strict and brutal portrayal of modern infantry and mechanised combat has made it the thinking person's shooter, and it became so popular that there's even a standalone version that doesn't need BF2. Unfortunately BF2's base engine is starting to look a little like Minecraft compared these days, but the good news is many of its developers have moved onto a new project powered by the latest Unreal Engine 4. Called Squad, it promises to be the spiritual successor to Project Reality, and we went hands-on with the pre-Alpha to see how it's shaping up.



Considering how early the code is, Squad is already showing a hell of a lot of potential. The first thing we noticed is just how hard it is to hit somebody at range, just like real life. According to Keith Weisglas, Community Manager for Squad, a physicist working on the team, "...wrote a white paper on very elaborate air drag and bullet drop model, and for early optimization tests we are currently modelling gravity for bullet drop with a custom damage model based upon weapon and time since launch." No wonder we couldn't hit the side of a barn

at ranges of over one kilometre, which is currently around the distance that enemies fade into view.

While the alpha doesn't currently include vehicles, when

they do roll in they'll be a must to exploit the vast maps included in the game, with the largest areas a whopping sixteen square kilometres. We were extremely impressed at how far detail was drawn, easily rivalling ARMA 3's horizon-spanning views, yet performance remained exceptional. When vehicles finally do make it into the game, they'll be extremely limited, and players will need to use special classes to pilot them.

Teamwork is a crucial part of this game, as players must help their squad leader to deploy objects such as rally points (mobile spawns), barriers and weapon emplacements. Eventually it'll be possible to build large firebases, with players having to ferry supplies via truck, armour or chopper to keep them stocked. A powerful

SOUNDS LIKE HELL

Squad is already a very pretty game, in a realistic, subtle kind of way, but it's the soundscape that really blew our eardrums away. From the crack of a passing bullet to the whump of a grenade detonating, Squad's sound effects are already nigh on perfect. Most noticeably realistic is gunfire – instead of the exaggerated booming shots heard in Hollywood, the M4's crackle just like we they do on CNN, with the barking AK easy to distinguish over the din of a hectic firefight.





"Actual, this is Nobhead. Permission to change my callsign, over!"



Pretty sweet Die Hard 2 reference

When vehicles finally do make it into the game, they'll be extremely limited



VOIP system makes communicating with pals a breeze, and we love the 3D positional VOIP that makes it possible to hear enemies in the distance.

One challenge for the devs is balancing the asymmetrical teams; US forces have magnified sights and will be able to utilise better vehicles, while the Insurgents are limited to primitive AKs and RPGs. However, it's a problem that Project Reality figured out, giving the weaker forces abilities such as spotting, higher spawns and penalties to the US if they shoot unarmed civilians.

Based on our time with the early Alpha, Squad is shaping up to be the pre-eminent realistic shooter on the market, with its rock-solid netcode and team-focused tactics giving it the leg-up over ARMA 3. If its strict adherence to the laws of reality sound like your kind of game, head to <http://joinsquad.com/> to help the game reach new Kickstarter stretch goals.

BENNETT RING PC

Defect

The inevitable mutiny

DEVELOPER THREE PHASE INTERACTIVE
PUBLISHER THREE PHASE INTERACTIVE
DUE 2015
sdkgame.com

When you're the captain of the most powerful ship in a sector of space you are, by default the most powerful person in that sector, so it's not surprising that there is a long line of mutineers willing to eject the captain into space for a chance to sit in the big chair. This conga-line of mutineers forms the crux of Defect, the Australian made 'Spaceship Destruction Kit'. Build a ship to complete a combat mission only to have it taken from you by the crew at the end of the mission, build a new ship to tackle the next mission only to face the last ship you lost. It's this idea of having to face your last ship in combat that informs the title.

The game is split into three phases, the first being shipbuilding, the second combat and the third the inevitable mutiny. Building a ship is a simple task based around a power core. Each power core has a different amount of available energy, the default currency for what other parts are fitted to the ship. Different engines have different manoeuvrability, thrust and acceleration, crew quarters and cabins can hold different numbers of crew members and may be armoured. Weapons have different firing effects and ranges. Wings enhance

manoeuvrability and so on. The core and the crew compartment give a baseline for the amount of power and number of crew available to build your ship using a simple drag and drop interface in which players can resize, mirror and position components to put their ship together. The top down perspective means that the way the ships parts are layered effects the way they are integrated into the ship – putting the core on the top layer leaves it vulnerable to attack but putting it under an armoured section gives it some protection, but putting too many layered parts in the same place can cause overheating or problems with the core.

Once the ship is finished it's time to launch into the next mission. Although Defect is, at its core, a space combat game, it's more akin to a ship combat game than it is an active space shooter. Rather than directly controlling the weapons of a ship, players instead have control of thrust, acceleration and direction, with weapons automatically firing when in range of a target. The momentum of the ship is the key factor when it comes to flight. No matter how manoeuvrable a ship, the lack of friction in space means that the forward momentum is the deciding factor when it



comes to slowing down, turning or changing direction. Due to this control system, Defect feels something like a naval combat game, with players having to judge their approach vectors and angles of attack to use momentum to set up broadsides or to keep guns on the enemy as long as possible to inflict maximum damage before having to turn around to make another pass. It's not the most action packed combat, but constructing the right ship for the right job and taking out waves of enemy ships followed by your previous ship is definitely a satisfying experience. **PC**

Dropsy

Oh god, kill it with fire

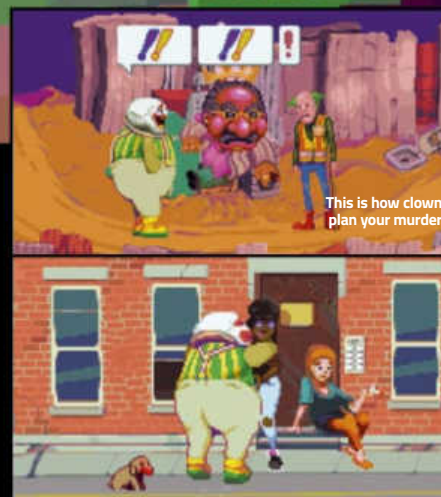
DEVELOPER TENDERSHOOT
PUBLISHER DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DUE SEPTEMBER
dropsythec clown.com

Dropsy is an old fashioned term for oedema, a medical condition that sees people retaining fluid to such a degree that they become bloated. It's also the name of a creepy as hell, touchy feely clown who can talk to animals and likes to hug everything, inanimate or not. After a lethal fire at the family circus at which he performed, nearly toothless and horrendously obese clown Dropsy lives in the stitched together remains of the tent with his sick father and a dog. He sets about to uncover the truth about the fire and discover the secrets of his past in a new take on the old point-and-click formula. Rather than having a single narrative thread to follow, Dropsy is instead set in an open world full of characters to interact with, things to hug and puzzles to solve. It's an open world point-and-click adventure.

Over the last couple of decade pop-culture seems to have gone out of its way to make people who weren't already coulrophobic afraid of clowns. Any time they appear in a movie or TV show nowadays they seem to be either some kind of serial killer, supernatural monster or Patch Adams, not the lovable goofs they are apparently meant to be.

Interestingly, this idea plays into the basis of Dropsy. The character is endlessly positive and naively kind. He responds to everything with unconditional love and hugs. The footage we've seen so far veers between the nightmarish and the saccharine but no matter how dark things get, Dropsy seems to remain a force of positivity. Instead of reacting to people's distrust of him (we have to assume that Dropsy at least appears to be responsible for the circus fire) with hate and anger, he responds with hugs. According to the developer, loving the unlovable is one of the major themes of the game. As someone who has to battle with his fight or flight response every time he sees a clown in the flesh, Dropsy looks pretty damn unlovable to me.

The eponymous hellbeast can only communicate with animals, but rather than use traditional text, developer Tendershoot (a pseudonym for Jay Tholen) has instead opted for visual icons. Deciphering these icons and making sense of "conversations" looks as though it will form the first layer of solving puzzles. The icons are apparently also open to interpretation. The meaning a player takes from them is influenced by their



own perceptions. These puzzles will unlock the secrets of the world around him, filling in more details about the people he meets and the events leading up to the fire. Some puzzles will also explore Dropsy's subconscious, shown in the trailer and early gameplay footage to be a LSD flashback nightmare.

Dropsy's road to PC has been long - he was first a platform character, that part of an experimental game on the Something Awful forums, and then a failed Kickstarter campaign. Now after over a decade and a final, successful, Kickstarter campaign we can expect to play Dropsy in September. God help us all. **DANIEL WILKS PC**



Make It Yours.

The Cooler Master difference

■ It may surprise a lot of people, but back in 1999, Cooler Master was the first company to bring an all-aluminium PC case to the market – and it was a hit. It overturned the idea that computers had to be boring beige boxes, and over the next decade Cooler Master continued to innovate in the space. The company also helped bring side windows and other aesthetic flourishes into the mainstream, following the growing case-modding movement.

But it's not all about looks, as 2004 saw the release of the Centurion, with an all-metal mesh front designed to increase airflow in systems that were getting increasingly warmer as PCs got more and more powerful, and enthusiasts pushed their systems to the limit. That same year the CM Stacker series was introduced, which allowed dual power supply systems to be easily built.

2007 saw the mighty Cosmos line introduced, which sparked the dawn of a new age of PC case evolution, and the year after the High Air Flow range – or HAF – was introduced.

Now, we are at the dawn of another new era, with the MasterCase 5 series.



Introducing the MasterCase 5

■ The MasterCase 5 is a whole new reimagining of PC case design. Many gamers and enthusiasts look upon their systems like a driver looks upon a performance sports car – it's an object of devotion, endlessly tweaked to perfection. The MasterCase 5 is designed so that enthusiasts can now not only tweak their components, but also their case.

Designed by a crack crew of modders, veterans, and gamers, the MasterCase 5 is designed from the ground up to be the most adaptable case ever made. Every panel can be replaced by alternative designs, with windows, mesh, or even carry handles. The interior can be customised for air or watercooling, for a lot or few hard drives, and for epic SLI or CrossFire setups.

The MasterCase 5 can be anything you want it to be.



"IT'S THE SPIRIT THAT FIRST INSPIRED ALL OF US TO OPEN OUR PC CASE."

We see a future in which all of us work together and we're excited by the possibilities that might entail. So we're reaching out to people across our community and beyond to see how we can help them achieve their goals. Whether it's through sponsorship or promotion, components or know-how, Cooler Master is coming your way. And if you have an idea you think will work, using anything we have to offer or something we haven't thought of yet, just fire away.

Moving forward, the maker spirit is going to be apparent in all the things we do: cases, cooling and components. You'll be able to tell it was there during their design, lurking like a newbie fanboy, peering over shoulders. Just when our product designers sat back to rest, it would urge them to think again and try harder to provide more options, more hands-on flexibility; to improve the thermal elements, or scope for self-expression.

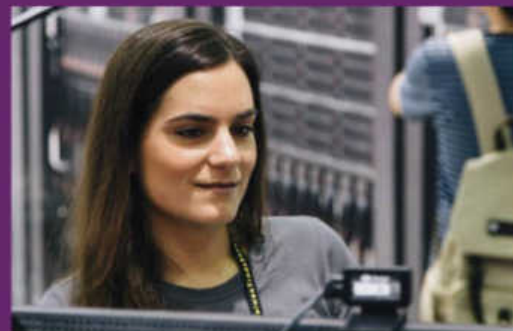
MEET THE MAKERS

We realise people want to express themselves in all the things they make and do. So in everything from components to cases, the way they are configured and the way they look and feel, Cooler Master is committed to giving greater choice and control to you.

That commitment is made real in our community of makers and creators. After all, it's you guys who bring our ideas to life.



Dave 'drdavier' Cooper GAME DESIGNER



Lisa 'shifty' Catino PRO GAMER

WHY DOES IT APPEAL TO A GAMER?

"For a gamer the MasterCase 5 series has the room for all kinds of powerful hardware, from air-cooled rigs to water-cooled, super-quiet powerhouses. With removable drives cages, you can make way for even the longest of video cards, in two or even three-way solutions! And all of this in a case which just looks amazing."

- Lisa 'shifty' Catino



MasterCase Pro 5

- 1 Unique clip-and-click components panel
- 2 Supports up to six 140mm fans
- 3 Support for three dual-slot, extra long graphics cards
- 4 Dual chamber design with partition panel
- 5 Two slip-and-clip SSD drive pockets with four mounting positions
- 6 Top panel with water cooling bracket for 240mm radiator support

WHY DOES IT APPEAL TO MAKERS?

"The MasterCase 5 is really beautiful! And this instills a sense of capability that it really follows through with. It's super flexible and durable, allowing me to use and expand my system easily. In Beijing, where I live, you have to deal with the worst of dust and sandstorms, regular cleaning of your PC is essential to optimal operation and so my MasterCase 5 has most of the drive trays removed giving me tons of space to use a compressed air spray or even vacuum nozzle to clean it."

- D.E. Cooper PhD



MasterCase 5

- 1 Unique clip-and-click components panel
- 2 Supports up to six 140mm fans
- 3 Support for three dual-slot, extra long graphics cards
- 4 Dual chamber design with partition panel
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Games

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMES



The world has gone mad. Forget Counter Strike. Forget big name MMOs (which, apparently, a lot of people are). Forget the super-rich worlds of The Witcher 3 or Grand Theft Auto V.

Yes. Forget all of these. The game that all the cool kids - and the rest of us - are playing is Rocket League, a simple (ha!) game of turbo-powered soccer, played between teams of three cars capable of performing wide range of highly improbable tricks, trying to boost a giant, explosive ball into a massive net.

You've no doubt heard the phrase, easy to learn, difficult to master. It's one of the most basic tenets of most games, and Rocket League has it in spades. Even people who suck at it (your's truly) enjoy the hell out of it. It's bright, it's fast, and it's fun.

But it's not the only game we're playing, of course. I've fallen a little bit in love with the grimly hilarious Sorcerer King, and Daniel's been sweating buckets playing the torturously addictive Galacide. The fun never stops...

David Hollingworth
Digital Editor

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SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a “perfect” game. We’re not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn’t excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you’ll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

WE
PLAY
ON:



Rocket League

A Top Gear Special without Clarkson

DEVELOPER PSYONIX
PUBLISHER PSYONIX
PRICE \$19.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
rocketleague.psyonix.com

I am rubbish at Rocket League. Genuinely terrible. Most of my matches are something akin to watching an under six soccer team play. There's a lot of running around in random patterns trying vainly to touch the ball with whatever flailing limb has the longest reach interspersed with moments of stillness and confusion. Of course, I'm playing a game of PC car football but you get the picture. I'm genuinely terrible at the game, so much so that I think with enough practice and time I could only progress to being really bad. But it doesn't matter. There is a competitive spirit at the core of Rocket League but so far that doesn't seem to boil over into the actual experience. It's ridiculous, fast and most importantly fun, win or lose. It's a sports game that boils down the appeal of sports without featuring any of that actual sporting crap.

The core concept of Rocket League is beautiful, simple nonsense. Rocket cars play football in an enclosed arena. All of the corners are rounded allowing the cars

to climb walls if need be and a huge goal at either end of the field beckons the massive ball. No matter how skilled a gamer you are, your first few games are all but guaranteed to be a comedy of errors as you grapple with the surprising intricacies of the control scheme, the speed of boost, its effects on the ground and in the air, how to defensively and offensively flip the car, how to barrel roll to maintain momentum on a landing, how best to hit the ball to give it enough speed and momentum to make a shot on goal, how to defend, how to take out opposition cars. It can be a little overwhelming at first,

■ No matter how skilled a gamer you are, your first few games are all but guaranteed to be a comedy of errors ■

prompting you to simply hoon around like an idiot in the hope that you can somehow bash the ball into the goal in much the same way as some people play pool – smashing the ball and hoping it finds a pocket before friction stops it rolling. If you do get the ball into the goal it explodes, because of course it does. Even without the intricacies of control Rocket League is a blast, but when you start to get to grips with them it really comes into its own.

Cars move as quickly backwards as they do forwards, so sometimes it's more advisable to simply back up than turn, and when trying to outrace an opponent a forward flip can give you the speed boost you need to beat them to the ball. Directionality determines what the car does when jumping – flipping forwards, backwards in a vehicular approximation of a bicycle kick, spinning or performing a barrel roll. Physics are, let's say lenient, for both the cars and the ball. Not only are all the objects rather floaty when they are in the air, players can also control the axis and angle of their movement, giving that extra level of



precise control needed when trying to use a rocket car to punt a giant ball into a goal. Boost is a chaotic joy, filled through driving over small boost pads or picking up larger boost capsules that slowly respawn on the field. Boost is the fuel for everything other than basic driving and jumping in Rocket League – a well timed boost can get you the first touch on the ball, can knock an opponent out of line, clear a ball or score from half a field away but a poorly timed boost can leave you having to drive over some boost pads before you can effectively rejoin the game. This may only take a few seconds but in a game as fast and chaotic as Rocket League a few seconds is more than enough for goals to be scored. It's a complex set of moves and mechanics, each with a definite use in the game tied together with a remarkably simple control system, lending Rocket League the air of accessibility while still having more than enough complexity to appeal to those of a more competitive mindset.

One of the things that quickly becomes clear after playing only a few matches is that Rocket League is predicated on a level playing field. Experience is rewarded for winning a game, sure, but an only slightly smaller amount is awarded for losing, and anything you do in a game is likewise rewarded. Goals are of course a prime XP earner, but getting the first touch, defending, clearing the ball and shots on goal are also rewarded. This experience unlocks new cars and cosmetic enhancement for the cars, but there is no advantage to driving a truck wearing a cowboy hat over one of the starting selection of cars and remaining tragically hatless. All cars handle the same and no matter the looks and relative size all seem to have the same hitbox, leaving the only defining factor being the skill of the player.

Being in a match with a good player, especially one that was a fan of one of developer Psyonix's previous games, Supersonic Acrobatic



there are ranked matches and a leaderboard letting you know who is at the top of the heap

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- + You heard the words rocket car and football used in a sentence
- + You live on Twitch
- + You have a car sombrero
- + You know enthusiasm > skill

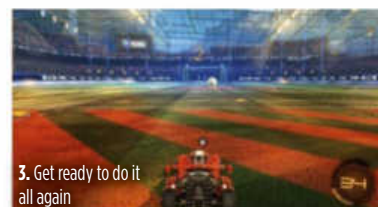
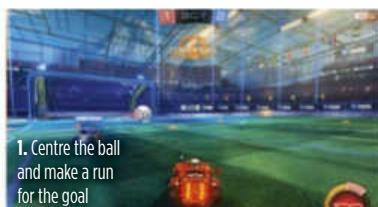
Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars, can be a little daunting. Seeing a player being able to make accurate shots on goal, juggle the ball or balance the ball on the roof of the car and “dribble” it towards your goal really shows you your own relative skill level, but unlike many other competitive games Rocket League doesn't seem to have the kind of ultra-competitive community that makes new players feel unwelcome. Part of this may have to do with the games rather absurd premise, but it also has to do with the fact that in any game other than rvr, even the most inexperienced player can contribute in some way. In a team of three it's perfectly acceptable to have a player roaming about like an

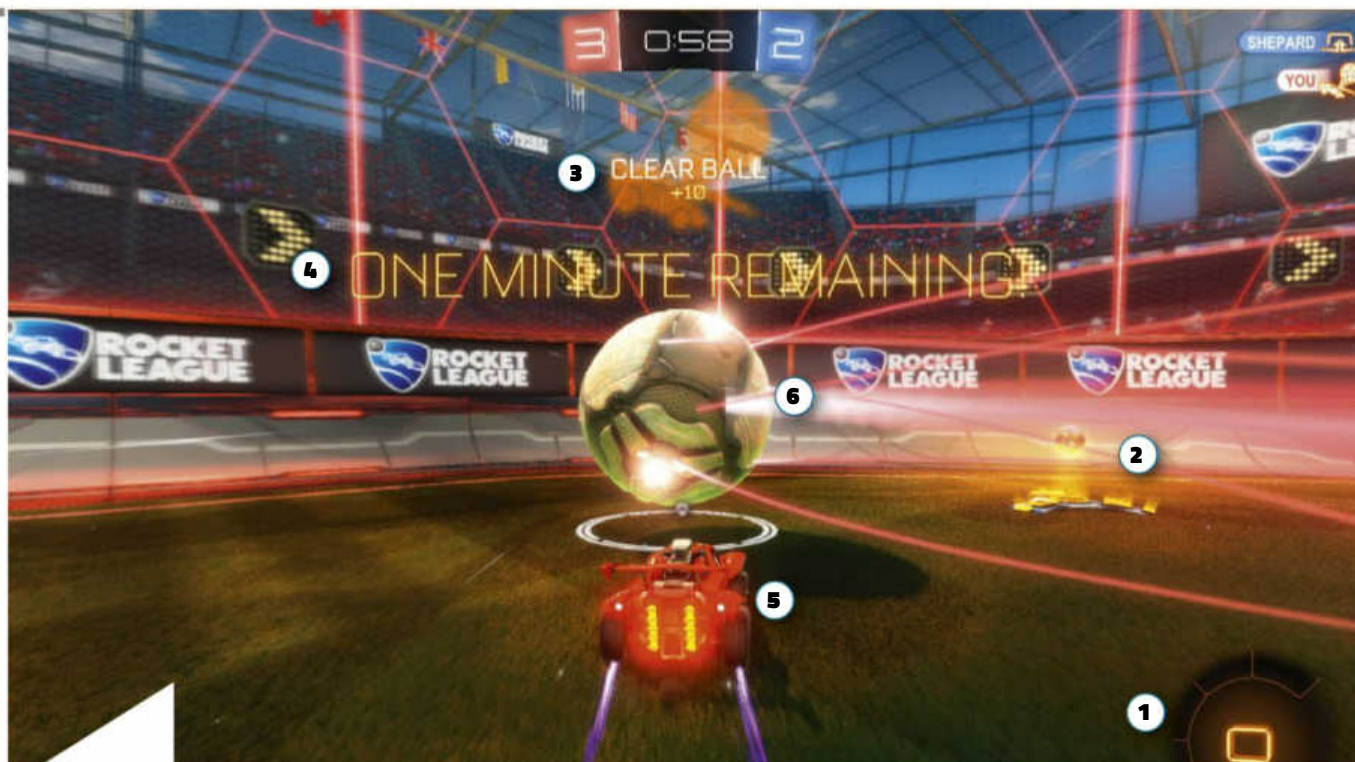
idiot trying to simply get a touch on the ball. While there are undoubtedly some strategies for how best to shoot a goal, Rocket League doesn't have the kind of in game knowledge requirement that makes other competitive online games – mobas for example – so difficult for new players to pick up and play, not to mention be accepted by the community.

For those who are ultra-competitive and want to play with a set team against the greatest competition available, there are ranked matches and a leaderboard letting you know who is at the top of the heap, but for everyone else there are a number of online and offline modes. Choose the number of players a side, from

SEQUENCE

THIS SPORTING LIFE





SPARE PARTS

1. Out of boost but on the ball

2. Boost orbs completely fill boost unlike boost pads that only give a small amount

3. Experience is awarded for most things, making you feel like you're actually contributing to the game, no matter how bad you are

4. Each game is only five minutes and time flies by

5. This car is sadly hatless. All hats are purely ornamental

6. When the ball isn't on the screen a pointer shows you its general direction so you can quickly re-enter the game



one to four and wait for the server to kick you into a game. Then it's a matter of showing your skill, or lack thereof for five minutes, get your XP and find another game. The servers are nice and full (there were nearly 80k players online at the time of this writing) so there's very little in terms of down time between games, but if the servers are down for some reason, or you're having trouble with your internet there are also single player modes that pit you and up to three AI allies against an equal number of bots. The basic difficulty setting is pretty terrible, but the higher difficulty levels actually pose a decent challenge and are good for honing your skills. A full seasonal

mode is also available against AI bots, giving the game a definite soccer feel offline. A handy training mode also instructs you as to the basics when it comes to defending the goal, being a striker and pulling off aerial shots.

With the exception of the rvr duels which prove to be uninspiring unless both players are equally good or bad at the game, Rocket League is a pure pleasure. It's a perfect example of how a simple, if ludicrous idea well realized can make for a truly memorable experience. The lack of bells and whistles or extraneous rules outside of the main game modes indicate how strong the core experience is. It's easy to pick up but has one of the longest,

steadiest learning curves in modern gaming, with each subsequent match improving your ability a little (a very little in my case), teaching you new ways to touch the ball or stymie an opponent. For a game predicated on every match using the same rules and every player being on the same level when it comes to in game advantage the variation between individual matches is enormous. No two play alike, and due to the fact that nobody has discovered any exploits or cheap tactics as yet, there is no foolproof strategy for play aside from having an experienced team. Instead what you get is five minute bouts of ridiculous fun. You can't really ask for much more than that. **DANIEL WILKS**

OR TRY THIS:



SUPRABALL SUPRA GAMES UG 2015

- ▲ FPS gun soccer
- ▼ No rocket jumps



FROZEN CORTEX MODE 7 GAMES 2015

- ▲ Deadly future sport
- ▼ Turn based



AaaaaAaaaaAAA- aaAAAAaAAAAA!!! DEJOBAAN GAMES 2009

- ▲ Competitive stupid skydiving
- ▼ No cars

VERDICT:

Fast, stupid and thoroughly enjoyable – Rocket League will eat your life five minutes at a time.

10

Victor Vran

Not to be confused with Victor Garber

DEVELOPER HAEMIMONT GAMES
PUBLISHER HAEMIMONT GAMES
PRICE \$19.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.haemimontgames.com

At first glance Victor Vran looks like another entry in the Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing series of action RPGs, but in reality it's a very different kind of animal. While there are similarities when it comes to the faux-Gothic seriousness of the story, the overall look of the game and the reliance on pop-culture references for humour, the way the two games play is very different. Victor Vran is about combat, not about character building. There are no classes, no skill trees or unlockable abilities. All skills are tied to equipment. What the eponymous character wears, wields and equips directly affects the way he functions.

Victor Vran is an itinerant demon hunter, visiting the town of Zagoravia to meet a friend. As luck would have it, not only does Vran's friend not make an appearance, it transpires that not only is Zagoravia infested by demons, the undead and other assorted beasties, it's actually something of a trap for demon hunters. Why? That's something for you to find out. It's all very serious to the point of being camp, but ultimately the story is redundant thanks to the way the levels are designed. It's a game about completing challenges rather than a game about story.

Each new map contains a number of achievements, each of which is rewarded with gold, XP or gear upon completion. Kill 50 monsters without taking damage, destroy 200 pieces of pottery, don't use Demon powers, kill X number of monsters with Y weapon – you know the drill. It's a very simple mechanic but it makes you want to play better and experiment with powers and weapons, something that is incredibly easy to do.



It's a game about completing challenges rather than a game about story

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- + You loved the Tropico series
- + You never had time to create characters
- + You want to mash monsters with a hammer
- + You still reference boomsticks

Rather than having specific skills, Victor Vran instead has access to the skills of the weapon he is currently wielding. A giant hammer might have splash damage for a normal attack and a jumping attack and a charge attack as special abilities, whereas a rapier has a fast combo base attack, and a dash and bleed for specials. After a few levels, Victor can equip two weapons that he can switch between, giving ample opportunity to experiment with attacks and combos. In addition to weapons, Vran can also equip Demon Powers, special abilities that must be charged by killing multiple enemies before use. These powers include damage shields huge magical attacks and the like and are dropped by powerful enemies.

Rather than skill points, Victor Vran instead features Destiny Cards, magical Tarot style cards that gift the demon hunter with passive bonuses and abilities, such as a small healing effect based on the amount of damage he does, or a bonus to critical strike chance. Each card has a point value ensuring that Victor has to equip an assortment of cards and not simply the best.

Combat is fast, smooth and addictive and the challenge structure gives ample scope for replayability. Victor Vran might not be the deepest game out there and the action can get repetitive, but it is hugely polished and a great deal of fun. **DANIEL WILKS**

OR TRY THIS:



VAN HELSING
NEOCORE GAMES
2013

- ▲ Incredible Adventures
- ▼ Skill trees



PATH OF EXILE
GRINDING GEAR GAMES
2013

- ▲ Huge skill tree
- ▼ Terrifyingly huge tree



HAND OF FATE
DEFIANT DEVELOPMENT
2015

- ▲ Abilities as gear
- ▼ Gear as cards

VERDICT:

A streamlined action RPG with the emphasis placed firmly on the action.

8

MISSING: An Interactive Thriller Ep.1

Fate By Numbers

DEVELOPER ZANDEL MEDIA
PUBLISHER ZANDEL MEDIA
PRICE \$3.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
Zandelmedia.com/games/

FMV games were a blight on the 90s. For every Tex Murphy game there was umpteen monstrosities unleashed upon the world that contained nothing but slumming actors hamming it up in front of a low budget green screen interspersed with some poorly animated shooting, flying or fighting sequences. A quarter century or so on from that dark time, FMV makes a brief comeback in the form of Missing: An Interactive Thriller. In many ways it's very different from the FMV games of old, but in others, unfortunately, it's all too similar.

The production quality is testament to how far camera technology has progressed since the 90s. The FMV is crisp and shot on location, giving the adventure of a kidnapped man trying to escape his Saw meets Escape Room meets Night Trap prison and the cop trying to find him before it's too late a polished, grounded look. There's some evident talent both in front of and behind the camera as well, with some decent hand held work, some nicely framed shots and actors who actually emote without hamming it up. The story also plays into the puzzle nature of the game rather than forcing game logic onto the scenario. A man wakes up in a room. His wrists are chained to the roof. "Play With Me" is written on the door. Each successive room he finds himself in contains another puzzle he has to contend with and often reminders that his wife and children miss him, hinting both at the stakes of the game and the fact that the man was probably not the best husband or father to begin with. Occasionally the game switches perspectives to the detective trying to find the missing man. He has to find clues as to what happened and lets the player



At least Missing is honest about its feelings towards you

There's an abstract appeal to a modern take on FMV, but Missing isn't the game to reignite the genre

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You think Saw should be more interactive

+ You cosplay as Tex Murphy

+ You're actually played by Tim Curry

know that this has happened before. Conceptually it all ties together quite well, with each section being well timed, switching from a tense prisoner scene to a slower, more contemplative police investigation scene.

Everything but the puzzling that is. The presentation of Missing is miles ahead of the 90s FMV games, as is the acting, concept and writing, but the puzzles are all but exact replicas of that dark age of adventure gaming. There are sliding block puzzles, find a word puzzles, puzzles where you have to make a thing look like the diagram you have for it and puzzles where you replace missing parts of machines by scavenging the screen to find said parts, a task sometimes made difficult by the fact that the backgrounds are dark and muddy, often obscuring

objects an necessitating pixel hunting. There is little to no challenge outside of the ill-conceived QTE style snap decisions that are made, mostly towards the end of the first chapter but also during the introduction of the detective, when the player has a few seconds to click a prompt that allows the detective to drink coffee, presumably without spilling it or getting it in his eye.

There's an abstract appeal to a modern take on FMV, but Missing isn't the game to reignite the genre. Chapter 1 is short and lacks challenge – you can blow through it in around 45 minutes – and while it definitely looks good, it still plays like the adventure games of the past we'd rather leave locked in a secret room, preferably without clues on how to escape. **DANIEL WILKS**

OR TRY THIS:



THE WAVY TUBE-MAN CHRONICLES
TWISTED PIXEL/TROMA
2011

▲ Troma does Mad Dog McCree
▼ Xbox 360 only



DONG DONG NEVER DIE
EB ENTERBRAIN
2013

▲ FMV fighting
▼ FMV fighting



HER STORY
SAM BARLOW
2015

▲ Legitimately amazing
▼ No real ending

VERDICT:

The presentation is great but the actual gameplay is firmly rooted in the early 90s.

5

Yatagarasu: Attack on Cataclysm

Of combat and lolicon

DEVELOPER PDW HOTAPEN
PUBLISHER NYU MEDIA
PRICE \$14.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
yatagarasu-ftg.com

Yatagarasu has had a long road to release. Created by three former King of Fighters developers, Yatagarasu has existed in various forms since 2008 until finally reaching its current form thanks to a successful Indiegogo campaign. Intended for hardcore fighting game aficionados and the professional scene, Attack on Cataclysm features a roster of diverse and solid characters, amusing in game commentary by a number of real life shoutcasters and fighting game commentators and a view to optimized online play. How does it all stack up?

At the core Yatagarasu is a tight, well put together fighting game. Although the roster only extends to 11 characters there is a good variation available with no two playing quite alike, no matter how similar they look – the three sword wielders all require different tactics and timing. The sprites look great, are well animated and easy to follow despite being very low resolution when blown up to a decent sized monitor. The fundamentals are very solid. Four attack buttons – light and heavy punch and kick – and two parry buttons. The suites of special moves and supers are all familiar in design with traditional inputs like quarter circles, dragon punches and charges making it relatively easy for a newcomer to pick up, and the supers, with the exception of the grappler that requires multiple 360s to pull off, are fairly accessible as well.

The two arcade modes – one with a simple ladder and the other with an actual, if massively overwrought and nonsensical story offer decent challenge and the training mode is surprisingly full featured, but when it comes to everything else Yatagarasu



There are no options for resolution or aspect ratio, so the game looks quite stretched

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- + You like your fighters 2D
- + Shoryuken?
- + You like a grappler in a crotch hugging belt

comes unstuck. There are no options for resolution or aspect ratio, so the game looks quite stretched on some screens. The game requires a controller but the controller initialization and input is not the tightest, to the point that during some games Yatagarasu decided that the controller was also a second controller, bringing in a new opponent. Third party controllers have a worse time than official XBOX controllers, but the D-pads on those aren't the best for fighting games. The online optimization promised in the crowdfunding campaign seems to be absent as well, making for some seriously poor online games with opponents with either far better or far worse pings. The arcade mode also simply comes to an abrupt

"Thanks for Playing" screen showing some rather iffy Loli art of one of the fighters, so there's that too.

If you're looking for some single player fighting or some good, stable and fast local multiplayer fighting (and are willing to put up with the occasional controller quirk) the Yatagarasu is definitely with the \$15USD the developers are asking, but until the online functionality is properly fixed, there is some kind of resolution change or letterboxing to give the right aspect ratio and the controllers are fully optimized, stick to the games that were the obvious inspiration for Attack on Cataclysm, especially Garou: Mark of the Wolves, King of Fighters 98 and Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike. **DANIEL WILKS**

OR TRY THIS:



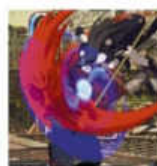
DONG DONG NEVER DIE
EB ENTERBRAIN
2013

- ▲ Fat guy with chains
- ▼ John Connor



SKULLGIRLS
REVENGE LABS
2012

- ▲ Amazing all girl fighting
- ▼ Girl germs?



GUILTY GEAR XX ACCENT CORE PLUS R
ARC SYSTEM WORKS
2015

- ▲ Faust
- ▼ Word salad

VERDICT:

A solid fighting core surrounded by a very bare bones, somewhat unoptimised package

7



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Sorcerer King

It begins when you lose...

DEVELOPER STARDOCK
PUBLISHER STARDOCK
PRICE \$US39.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
sorcererking.com

There's a lot of games that follow a similar path, one well-trodden by many a classic fantasy novel. Struggling loner saves desperate kingdom from impending doom at the hands of a mighty dark lord. Sorcerer King starts as most of these tales, and changes the basic premise to something a little bit darker.

Basically, the free world lost, the Sorcerer King won, and now the nations strive to throw off his evil rule. And, to make matters worse... the mad bastard isn't content with merely 'ruling the world'. He's planning on casting a mighty spell that has the upside of turning him into a God, but with the annoying downside of, well, destroying the world.

This simple inversion of the classic fantasy trope flavours of every aspect Sorcerer King, turning a good if non-descript 4X fantasy adventure into something a lot more interesting. From the very beginning, the sense of impending doom is pretty strong, and how you approach this apocalyptic scenario shapes how the game unfolds.

At the start of the game you choose the leader of your struggling nation. You might be a defeated warlord, or a tyrant with delusions of grandeur, but each of the six possible leaders have something in common. For one, they are all pretty well defined – you can tweak things like starting champions and spell research, but to allow for a more structured tale than previous Stardock titles, the actual narratives of each possible character are set. This means the game lacks the ability to really shape your in-game avatar, but in turn you get a story structured around you and your strained relationship with the Sorcerer King himself.



the Sorcerer King won, and now the nations strive to throw off his evil rule

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- + You like the idea of basically taking on Sauron
- + You fight better as an underdog
- + Crafting, questing, and killing mobs is your thing

This is most evident in the conversations between you and Mr. S. King. He might notice your expanding armies, and ask what's going on, leading to a simple conversation tree that may or may not lead to certain, ahem, consequences. As you recruit champions and other units, some may in fact be the King's spies; and, since the clock is literally ticking on your existence, you really can't afford to turtle up in your one starting city and wait things out.

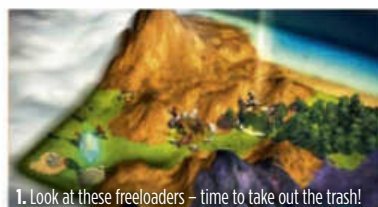
One of the neatest aspects of the game is the Doomsday Clock, a progress bar that ominously fills up as the Sorcerer King gets closer to his goal. Not only is this regularly advanced by the passage of turns in game, but some of your decisions can

also speed it up. If you act too pushy, it gets faster, for instance, but some spells can also push the world closer to destruction, so you're constantly managing risk versus reward. One character class, the Tyrant, actually gets stronger as the Clock ticks away, making for a particularly risky game.

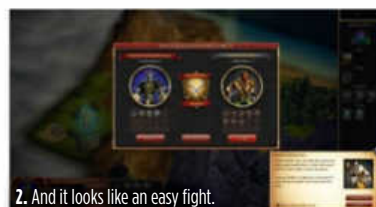
You're also not alone in the world. There are up to six other factions, which can be chosen or randomly picked, also trying to survive. Some may be enemies, others neutral, or you can try to get them to ally with you against the Big Bad. Progression through each randomly generated map and campaign is like walking a tightrope made up of bad decisions and well-considered fantasy tropes.

SEQUENCE

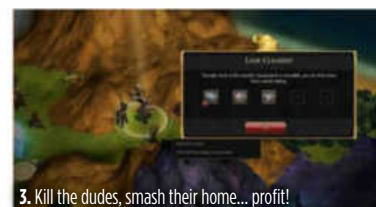
DEALING WITH A BANDIT LAIR



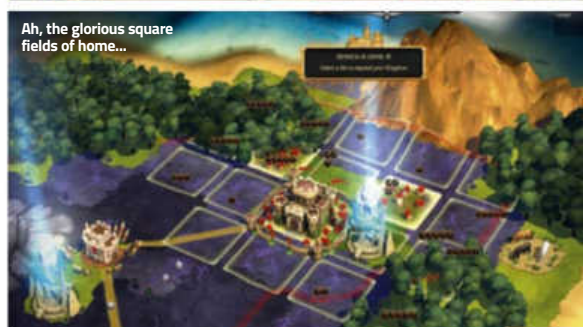
1. Look at these freeloaders – time to take out the trash!



2. And it looks like an easy fight.



3. Kill the dudes, smash their home... profit!



READY... FIGHT!

1. Your hero units are particularly powerful
2. Use their abilities wisely. They can be very effective
3. Some units are actually small squads
4. Adding a second Hero can really boost a stack
5. Keep an eye on initiative order
6. Pesky archers tend to move back. Hit 'em with your own ranged units

Thankfully, the game's writing is grim, but funny. As you discover quests for your champions and armies to complete, you might be called upon to forcibly recruit or trick possible troops, or even walk away from some troubles completely.

Nearly every element of gameplay is pretty simple, and the UI takes a very active hand in making sure you don't forget anything. If the last chest you looted has something that makes up a crafting recipe, a notification pops up. If you've left a unit idle, likewise. You move your units – and the game has a pretty small unit count, which is actually pretty relaxing – around the map, building outposts to expand your empire, exploring, taking on bandits and minor monsters, and then dealing

with your competitor states. Along the way you need to build shrines on the mysterious Shards, which are the source of all magic in the land.

You can either let the AI handle battles automatically, which is surprisingly effective, or fight things out on a simple square grid. Here, the combat actions execute based on unit initiative, and should be intimately familiar to any Might and Magic fan. However, not only does each of your units have their moves and attacks (special or otherwise), but your sovereign can also influence the course of a battle. Sovereign spells are very powerful early on (the game does a good job of making you feel like you're not just starting out), but do a get a little flat in the end-game. We're particularly

fond of the Tyrants Hypnotise spell, which can turn enemies into allies.

There's a distinctly boardgame feel to Sorcerer King, thanks to its low unit count and simple map mechanics, and while it's certainly fun, the tendency for the end-game to get rather samey does reduce the game's replayability. That said, it really isn't a game you want to play a lot of – it doesn't have the same deeply addicting pull of other, similar titles. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, either, as it's a great game to play when you're feeling like something a little bit different. Its combination of simple but clever mechanics, focused storytelling, and a really unique premise, make for a charming 4X title.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH

OR TRY THIS:



HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC VII

UBISOFT 2015
▲ Could be the best yet?
▼ Not out just yet.



ELEMENTAL: FALLEN ENCHANTRESS

STARDOCK 2012
▲ Made by the same guys!
▼ Simplistic graphics and sound



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

SEGA, 2015
▲ MORE EPIC!!!
▼ CA needs a win, badly.

VERDICT:

An interesting take on a classic genre, with some great writing and variably rich worlds to explore.

7

Galacide

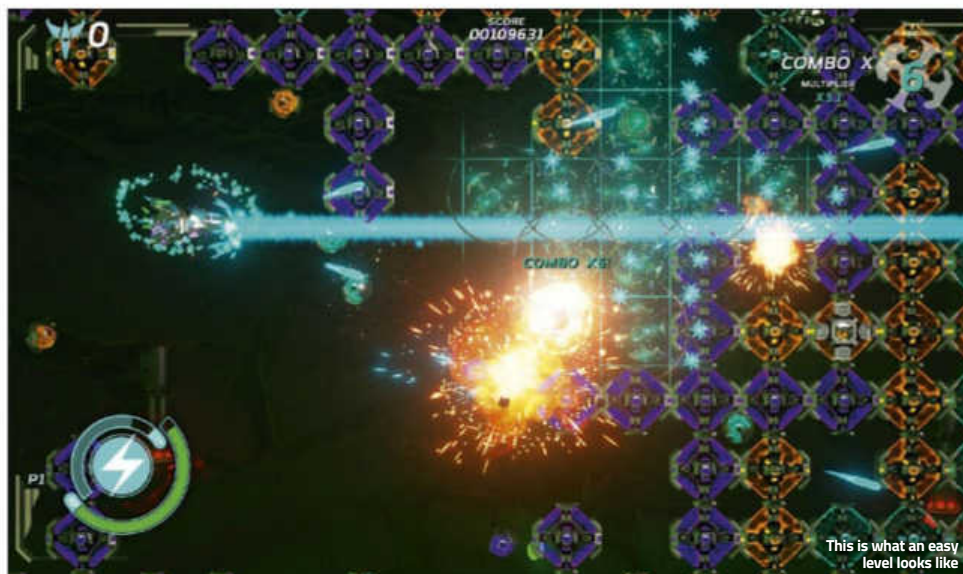
Aaaargh Type

DEVELOPER PUNY HUMAN
PUBLISHER PUNY HUMAN
PRICE \$9.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
galici.de

The first time I sat down to play Galacide became, unbeknownst to me, became something of a spectator sport. The rest of the office apparently gathered around to watch me play due to what was described as a “hilariously serious look” and the sweat on my brow during those fateful 11 minutes. I say apparently because I was unaware of my co-workers. Hell, during my first play session I was unaware of time passing, the outside world or my own mortality. Galacide took up all of my brain and there wasn’t enough left to pay attention to reality.

Games combining elements of match three style mechanics (or match four in this case) with another genre aren’t all that rare, with numerous gem matching RPGs available on Steam, but few if any of them so seamlessly merge two disparate game styles as Galacide. Combining a side scrolling space shooter with Puzzle Bobble/Bust A Move match four gameplay is a natural and logical fit. On a basic level players control a small ship moving from left to right, shooting enemy ships to grab coloured orbs needed to clear the approaching “bitwall” made by these machine organisms. The basic ship can only carry one orb at a time as well, just to make things a little more challenging. You can unlock other ships, one of which can hold two orbs at a time, but the challenge remains.

It’s a simple idea elevated by some very clever mechanics. The same button shoots the ship’s guns and fires the coloured balls for colour matching, so you can’t pick up an



This is what an easy level looks like

“I was unaware of time passing, the outside world or my own mortality”

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- + You want to ignore the world
- + You think Candy Crush is for kids
- + You thought Puzzle Bobble needed more guns

orb while shooting and can’t shoot while trying to make a colour match, forcing you to constantly have to switch between being of the offense and defence. It’s a choice that is often fraught with danger - do you concentrate on shooting the enemies streaming across the screen or do you try and clear enough bitwall that you can manoeuvre easily and won’t be crushed against the left side of the screen? There’s also the matter of how you use the coloured orbs. Firing them off from a distance simply adds them to the pile, hopefully joining three or more other similarly coloured parts of the bitwall and removing them from the screen. Rather than firing the orb from a distance, players

can also use it to change the colour of a block of bitwall by moving up next to the block and firing when the coloured orb is inside the bitwall.

Although there are never an overwhelming number of enemy bullets on the screen, even during the boss battles, Galacide still evokes that frantic sense of bullet hell thanks to the amount of concentration it takes to keep track of killing enemies and clearing the bitwall using the colours they drop. Add in up to three other players and things become even more frantic. Galacide also features a straight up 30 level puzzle mode, but compared to the campaign it’s little more than a slight distraction.

DANIEL WILKS PC

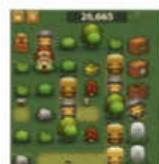
OR TRY THIS:



MIGHT & MAGIC: CLASH OF HEROES
CAPYBARA GAMES
2011
▲ Match 3 turn based strategy
▼ DS port



HUNIEPOP
HUNIEPOT
2015
▲ Match 3 dating
▼ Nothing



TRIPLE TOWN
SPRY FOX LLC
2012
▲ Match 3 city building
▼ No aliens

VERDICT:

Addictive and completely engrossing – you’ll lose time playing Galacide.

9

OlliOlli 2: Welcome to Olliwood

Skate or Die?

DEVELOPER ROLL 7
PUBLISHER DEVOLVER DIGITAL
PRICE \$12.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.roll7.co.uk

You'll want a controller to play OlliOlli 2: Welcome to Olliwood. There's no two ways about it. The PC port of the Playstation 4 indie does have keyboard controls but they are sadly inadequate when it comes to the intricacies of pulling off skate tricks and long, combo-building lines. Thankfully the developers are pretty honest about this - as soon as the game boots it tells you it's best enjoyed with a controller, and enjoyable it definitely is. Boiling down the appeal of skating games like the Tony Hawk series to its basics, OlliOlli 2 is a game all about that one perfect skating line, making an epic combo that lasts an entire level, or at least as long as you can maintain it to fulfil the five challenges of each level to unlock the next level. Unlike the Tony Hawk games, OlliOlli 2 is a 2D, sidescrolling affair, with a simple but nicely animated hand drawn skater pulling off tricks over a number of levels divided into different worlds, each with a different overriding theme, such as grinding, manuals and reverts, or a combination of all the skills learnt across the game.

Despite looking simple, OlliOlli 2 is anything but. The range of tricks is enormous and it's as mechanically complex as any other skating game. The left thumbstick controls tricks. Holding the stick down and releasing triggers an ollie, quarter circle rolls, dragon punches and other inputs trigger different tricks that can be modified using the shoulder buttons. Players must hit a button to land perfectly, grinds are performed by holding the left stick in a direction just as you touch a rail and so on. Timing is crucial to every action, from nailing



■ OlliOlli 2 is a game all about that one perfect skating line, making an epic combo ■

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You think Tony Hawk had too many dimensions

+ You'd rather skate than die

+ You only travel by grind

a trick to landing properly, making the game sometimes feel like a hybrid skating/rhythm action game.

Levels are fairly small giving players the chance to quickly learn the layout to optimise their trick run. You can jump back to the start of the level with the touch of a button, further reinforcing this idea of nailing the perfect run. For the first few hours of play, nailing a perfect run, completed in a single combo seems like a pipedream considering how precise timing has to be to nail half of the tricks in the game, or even to flawlessly land, but after enough time, everything falls into place, the timing makes sense and the perfect runs start to flow. It can be pretty exhilarating.

The problem with OlliOlli 2 is that, for most people, those hours of getting used to the controls and timing will be spent playing levels over and over again so you can get that perfect run requires to score high enough, get a long enough combo, pull off the right tricks or what have you to complete the challenges required to get to the next level. To say the learning curve is high is something of an understatement. It's steep and the emphasis on repetition, whilst being appealing to perfectionists is more than a little frustrating during some stages. It's unfortunate that the challenges and repetition are probably enough to put a lot of people off what is otherwise an excellent game.

DANIEL WILKS **PC**

OR TRY THIS:



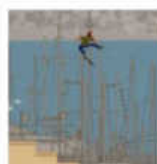
ONE FINGER DEATH PUNCH
SILVER DOLLAR GAMES
2014

▲ Rhythm fighting
▼ No skating



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 2
LTI GRAY MATTER
2000

▲ The best Tony Hawk
▼ Too many dimensions



OLLIOLLI
ROLL 7
2014

▲ The first
▼ Not the best

VERDICT:

If you have the patience to redo the same level over and over again in search of perfection, OlliOlli 2 is pretty damn great.

8

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Welcome to Upgrade Australia

Your monthly guide to essential PC upgrades and gear

MORE THAN A MAGAZINE

PC & Tech Authority is more than just a magazine and website. It's a collection of fine people with an interest in – or even love of – good tech. It's you, it's us, and it's the many people working for the companies that design and build the gear we like.

In March this year, we brought it all together. After six months of fascinating magazine features examining all aspects of our Upgrade Australia partner's tech, we held a major event showcasing real gear, and connecting you with the people that make it. Our stage show allowed a series of expert speakers to share with the audience what was hot, why it's hot and what's coming next. Afterwards, our display area was explored for hands-on time with the gear, all fuelled by (seemingly!) limitless food and drinks. And we're doing it again.



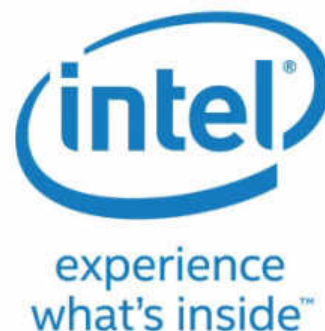
THE UPGRADE AUSTRALIA SITE

www.pcauthority.com.au/upgradeaustralia
Catch the latest stories and announcements here, and register your interest in attending the next Upgrade Australia event.

MORE THAN AN EVENT

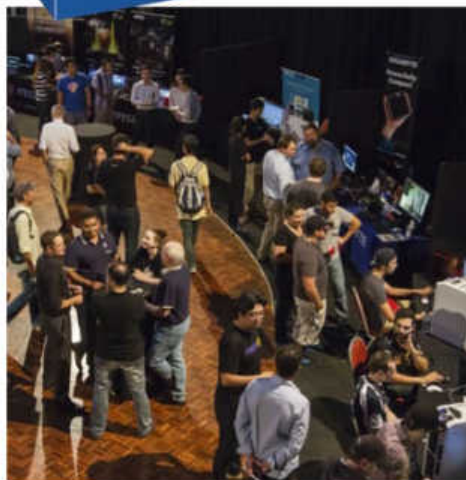
Upgrade Australia starts here and now. For each of the next six issues we will bring you a look at a particular part of the tech scene, focussing on each of our Upgrade Australia partners and gear.

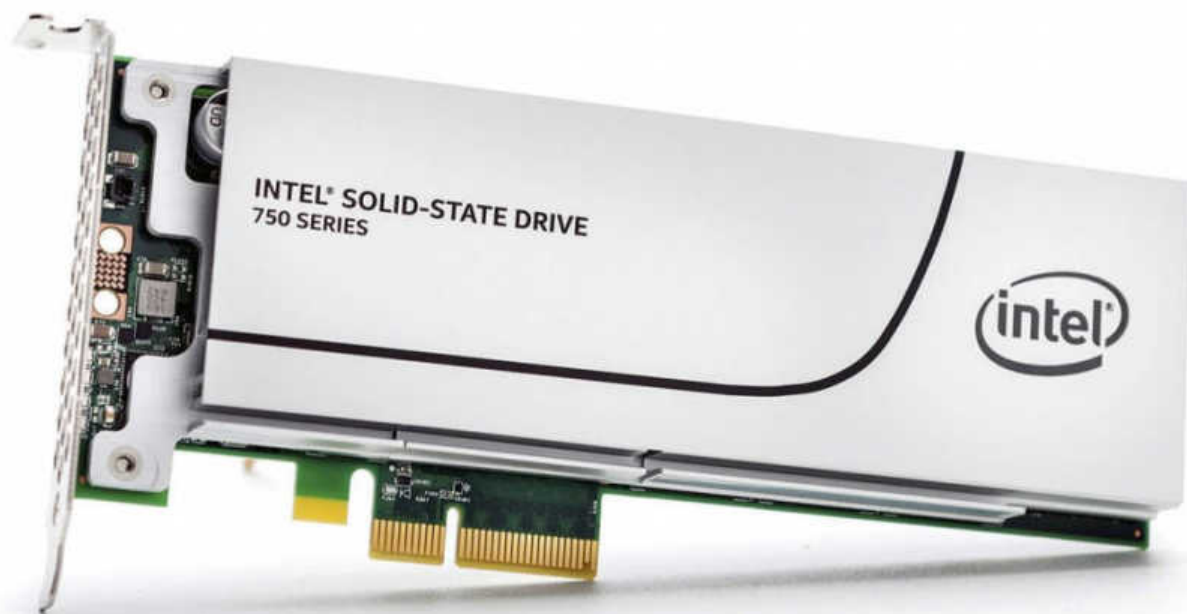
There's much more to come. Like a very cool competition with an incredible upgrade kit your PC will love. The details will be announced at the event.



A BIG YEAR FOR UPGRADES

The second half of this year promises to be an exciting one, with Upgrade Australia focusing on the latest in tech and gear, including Intel CPUs, Microsoft Windows 10 and more. Later we will look at the new 100-series motherboards as part of our expanded coverage throughout PC & Tech Authority. This month, we're taking a good look at Intel's very new and very exciting 750 SSD. Last issue we did a full review and were so impressed it went straight to the Perfect PC in our kitlog section.





THE FUTURE OF STORAGE, TODAY

INTEL 750 SERIES SSD

A spotlight on the unprecedented consumer speed of the Intel 750 Series SSD, and how you can take advantage of an incredible speed boost

While the Serial AT Attachment (SATA) interface continues to deliver extremely fast read and write speeds for a standard SSD, those seeking the next level of extreme performance now have a very appealing option.

There are several new storage standards available, but delving into those can be confusing, and there's really no need to explore those alternatives when the fastest technology is already here.

INTRODUCING NVME

The Intel 750 Series is the first solid-state drive (SSD) specifically built for consumers that takes advantage of the brand-new Non-Volatile Memory Express (NVMe) technology. Compared to SATA, NVMe has impressive performance improvements. Random and sequential read/write speeds are significantly improved, latency is reduced, and storage parallelism is boosted. On top of this, a drastic upgrade to the command queue, compared to SATA's Advanced Host Controller Interface (AHCI) standard, provides a huge increase in Input Output Operations Per Second (IOPS).

In terms of the actual numbers, an Intel 750 Series SSD offers up to four times the sequential read performance compared to the already speedy Intel 730 series SATA SSD. In practical terms, every task from booting an

operating system, multitasking and gaming, through to resource-intensive 4K video-editing is made faster on a 750 Series drive.

MULTIPLE FORM FACTORS

There are two form factors available for the Intel 750 Series SSD, and both offer two capacities. The first option is a half-height, half-length (HHHL) PCIe 3.0 Add-in Card, available in 400GB or 1.2TB sizes. With a 400GB Intel 750 SSD, there's enough storage space for everyday use as a primary drive, while the 1.2TB option makes working with larger files a cinch.

The Add-in Card is a great upgrade option for a desktop that has the space for it, and there's also a 2.5-inch U.2 form factor. This solution is also handy for when a PCIe 3.0 slot isn't easily accessible, such as when multi-GPU systems restrict access to slots, or for smaller cases where internal real estate is a premium. It can also attach to M.2 slots using an adaptor or hyperkit.

BUILT TO LAST

The Intel 750 Series has a life expectancy of 1.2 million hours Mean Time Between Failures (MTBF) and ships with a five-year warranty. On top of this, there's full power-loss protection on the 750 Series, meaning data stored in the cache at the time of power loss will still be restored upon restart.

"This is easily the fastest consumer drive we have tested, and by a large margin."

PC & Tech Authority August 2015

The 750 SSDs operate at as little as 4W while idle, and up to 22W during active read/write processes for the 1.2TB options, across form factors.

Inbuilt self-monitoring, analysis and reporting technology (SMART) tracks the health of the 750 SSD, while Intel Solid-State Drive Toolbox (intel.com/ssdtoolbox) and Intel Data Migration Software (intel.com/ssdinstallation) are available for free download to further monitor the drive and easily transfer data from an older drive.

The Intel 750 Series SSD is a speedy and versatile consumer-grade storage solution that offers outstanding performance gains that will be valued by those demanding the best, which includes workstation users, especially CAD/CAM users, engineers, simulation specialists as well as HD video editors and of course hardcore gamers!

To find out where to buy the Intel 750 Series SSD visit:

www.intel.com.au/findareseller

Tech²⁴³

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE



Chill Out!

OK, you try and make a better cooler joke...

It's been a while since I've done a decent cooler roundup, so this issue I strapped a bunch onto Intel's stonkingly fast i7 4790K Devil's Canyon CPU. It turns out that this chip is aptly named, as this little baby was warm enough to give Satan a suntan after giving it a tiny increase in voltage. With a maximum safe temp of just 100C, even our best coolers were only able to drag it 15C or so away from the precipice.

It'll be very interesting to see how Intel's new Skylake processors perform when it comes to heat. They're going to use the new 14nm manufacturing process, which is a rather tasty shrink from the 22nm process of Devil's Canyon. They also apparently remove the Fully Integrated Voltage Regulator (or FIVR) from the die, which should help lower the thermal output, and hopefully Intel has figured a better Thermal Interface Material than the shabby paste job of the last generation.

With a little luck I'll have my mitts on the new i7 6700K processor by the next issue, which is rumoured to be the successor to the 4790K. I'm cautiously pessimistic about whether or not to recommend this as an upgrade. Leaked benchmarks suggest a 15% increase in performance compared to the 4790K, which isn't a great deal considering you'll need a new CPU, motherboard and DDR4 memory.

Perhaps the 6700K will make this month's cooler roundup more important than ever – if it's the slight performance boost we're expecting, buyers will be able to get 6700K beating performance with a Devil's Canyon, a solid cooler and a little overclocking...

Bennett Ring
Tech Editor



Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.



Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU
INTEL I7 3770K
www.intel.com.au



MOBO
GIGABYTE Z77X-UD3H
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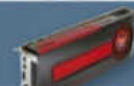
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www.corsair.com



DISPLAY
DELL U2711
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Frozen

The PCPP Cooler roundup

One of the least reviewed components in today's PCs is the CPU cooler. We're not sure if it's simply because they're not very glamorous, or users think they're all much of a muchness, but finding definitive data on which cooler will keep your CPU calm and chilly isn't easy. It's strange, as there's nothing worse than an overly loud cooler buzzing away to ruin the immersion of your favourite game, and overclockers need every spare degree they can get to extract the maximum performance out of their chip. It's been a long time since PC PowerPlay has conducted a cooler test, so we've rounded up eight coolers to see which one is worthy of your PC, with an emphasis on performance coolers to be used on overclocked chips. First though, a little background on things to look for when buying a cooler.

CPU COOLER BUYING TIPS

Start by figuring out how much space you've got inside your PC case for a CPU cooler. Get out a ruler and measure the distance from your CPU to the side of the case, as well as any potential problem spots around the CPU socket, such as an overly large motherboard heatsink. You'd be

surprised at how big some air-cooled heatsinks are, with behemoths like the Noctua NH-D15 requiring plenty of space to fit. If you're thinking of going for an All-in-One cooler, check you've got room to screw the radiator and fans to the rear or top of your case.

Your next decision is to decide on the type of cooler, and for our purposes we're going to discuss air versus pre-built watercooling (commonly referred to as an All-in-One cooler). It's possible to build your own water cooling system, or go for an expensive Peltier cooler, but they're limited to a very small fraction of gamers. Air-coolers tend to be cheaper and less prone to mechanical failures, as they have fewer moving parts. On the other hand, All-in-Ones offer better cooling with lower fan noise... sometimes. As you'll see in our roundup, that's not always the case.

Finally, determine whether you're going to be overclocking or not. If you are, you're going to need a powerful CPU cooler, as the extra voltage required to push your CPU will raise the temperature. The maximum operating temperature of a CPU is referred to as its TJ Max, and it varies greatly – for the

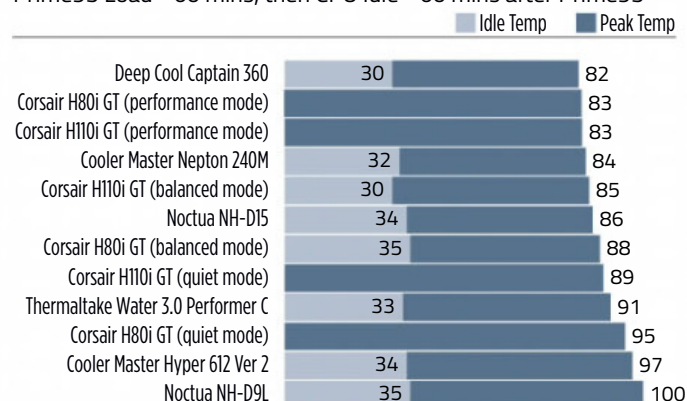
Intel i7 4790K we used in our benchmarks, it's just 100C.

HOW WE TESTED

We used an i7 4790K processor on an ASUS Maximus VII Hero motherboard, but increased the voltage to 1.216V to simulate an overclocked load. We disabled the board's automatic fan adjustment, leaving the CPU Fan speed at maximum. The CPU was cleaned and prepped after each test with ArtiClean Thermal Material Remover and Surface Purifier, and we used the included thermal paste or thermal pad that came with each cooler rather than a third party paste like Arctic Silver. To test ambient air temperature, a laser thermometer measured the surface the testbench was on, which stayed at a climate-controlled 24C. After running Prime95 for 60 minutes to heat the CPU up, RealTemp was used to measure the temperature. While the CPU was under 100% load, fan/pump noise was measured at a distance of 25cm from the cooler with a sound meter on an open test bench – expect lower operating volumes once it's inside a case. The CPU was then left to idle for another 60 minutes before the idle temp was once again measured.

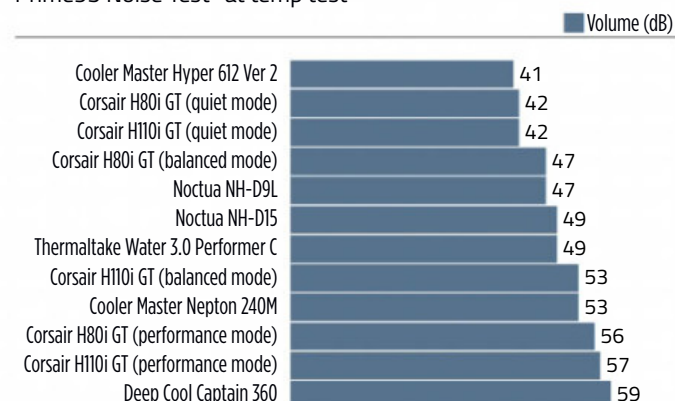
HSF Test ambient 24C

Prime95 Load - 60 mins, then CPU Idle - 60 mins after Prime95



I7 4790K at 1.216V

Prime95 Noise Test- at temp test



Cooler Master Hyper 612 Ver 2

Big, bold, and not so beautiful.

PRICE \$72
www.coolermaster.com

CoolerMaster has delivered an affordable, simple air cooler in the Hyper 612 version 2. Unfortunately its performance leaves a little to be desired if you're pushing a CPU, but it'll handle stock CPU frequencies with ease.

Six copper heatpipes join side-by-side to make the base, a method patented by Cooler Master which should help with heat absorption, as most other coolers attach the heatpipes to a separate cooling plate. These pipes then run up through the rather large stack of aluminium fins; this is a big cooler, measuring 139 x 102 x 160.4 mm. It's also rather weighty, tipping the scales at 732 grams, so make sure your mobo is well attached to your case before installing it.

Building this sucker was one of the

fiddlier coolers in the roundup, thanks to the tiny components used to make the backplate and heatsink mount. Thankfully the instructions are relatively easy to read, with clear images depicting everything.

When it came time to perform, this cooler reached a rather toasty max temp of 97C, just three degrees off our CPU's maximum temperature. This is probably due to the very low fan speed, which maxes out at just 1,300RPM. No wonder it was the quietest cooler in the test, at just 41dB. Idle temps were fine.

Given the high temps, we can't recommend this for overclockers. However, if you're looking for a super silent solution for your stock CPU, and have room for this brute, it's actually rather good value. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- Basically silent
- Affordable
- Decent stock performance
- No good for overclocking
- Fiddly install

VERDICT:

It can't handle overclocked CPUs, but this behemoth is fine for those running stock speeds and who want a silent cooler.

7

Cooler Master Nepton 240M

A nice balance of price, performance and audio output

PRICE \$139
www.coolermaster.com

It's amazing how affordable All-in-One coolers have become. Take this model for example; with a large 240mm radiator and twin fans, it's exceptionally priced. It's also quite the performer, provided you don't mind dealing with higher than average fan noise.

At the heart of this kit is the 120 litres per hour pump, which uses a proprietary design to bring water into the centre of the water block, and then pushes it out to either side. The water block uses a copper base to improve heat absorption. Twin FEP tubes feed the water in and out of the block, and Cooler Master claims they offer better water flow with fewer kinks than competing tubes.

The large 240mm radiator has a rather annoying rubber overlay that fits between it and the fans, but it's still not as annoying as the backplate design used here, which is a little confusing to build. Overall the installation process

was relatively fiddly, especially compared to the likes of Corsair.

There's absolutely no fan control included, so you'll need to use your motherboard's fan controls to tame the relatively loud 53dB of fan noise outputted by the two fans. This made it one of the loudest coolers in the roundup, but it also tamed our CPU well, reaching a peak temp of just 84C. That's perfect for overclockers.

If you don't mind dealing with annoying fan noise, the Nepton 240M kit is a great buy. Affordable and powerful, it could even have the noise issue solved with the clever use of custom fan curves, provided your motherboard supports them. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- Excellent performance
- Great price
- Very noisy
- Fiddly installation

VERDICT:

The Nepton 240M is indeed powerful, but you'll pay with fan noise to get the low temps offered here.

8

Corsair H110i GT

A princely sum for advanced features

PRICE \$179
www.corsair.com

At \$40 more than the Cooler Master Nepton 240m, yet adopting the same 240mm radiator with an All-in-One design, the Corsair H110i GT has a lot to prove. Unfortunately its performance isn't quite the leap ahead we were expecting.


The pump of this setup connects directly to your internal USB header, allowing you to monitor the temperature, fan and pump speeds. It also makes changing the speed of both fan and pump a cinch, with three pre-defined profiles of quiet, balanced and performance. Creating your own custom profiles is also easy, and you can set the software to log performance. However, doing so does bring in some CPU overhead; we noticed about a 5% load difference between the CPU when idling with and without Corsair Link.

We have to say we love Corsair's installation process – it's by far the

easiest, with clever designs removing the tiny screws and weird clips required by other coolers.

Strangely, we found that the performance of this beast was identical to its small sibling, the H80i GT, when set to performance mode, yet it was slightly louder. At this setting, fan noise was immense, second loudest in the roundup. Balanced mode was significantly quieter, and we measured a temperature of just 85C in this mode. That's 1C hotter than the CoolerMaster, despite measuring the same fan noise of 53dB.

If you don't mind paying \$40 extra for an easy install and monitoring capabilities, the H110i GT is a competent performer. Unfortunately it's not quite the beast we expected.

BENNETT RING 



VERDICT:

- Easy install
- Link monitoring software
- Easy to adjust pump and fan speed

- Performance is worse than the Nepton 240m at balanced mode

You're paying extra for Corsair's cool Link software and an easy install.

7

Corsair H80i GT (balanced mode)

Half the radiator, for most of the price


PRICE \$149
www.corsair.com

If your case doesn't have the room to squeeze in a large 240mm radiator, Corsair's H80i GT might be a better option. It still has twin fans, but they're strapped either side of a 120mm radiator.

Despite the radiator being much smaller than its 240mm brother, the H110i GT, we were quite surprised to see the price of this model being very close to its larger relative. Still, it seems Corsair has adopted the same pump and heatblock as its relative, which is where most of the cost lies. This means it shares the unique Corsair Link monitoring features, and it too can be set to operate at either quiet, balanced or performance modes.

As our noise test shows, there's a huge difference between the three modes when it comes to how annoying

they sound. At its quietest, it rivals the best of the best, at just 42dB. Kicking it to balanced mode increases it to a very bearable 47dB, while performance mode is horrible, at 56dB. Thankfully we didn't need to run it at the loudest setting to bring in solid results. Balanced mode delivered a top CPU temp of 88C, well within our 100C TJ Max of the i7 4790K.

And yet, this is a rather expensive option. Considering the Noctua NH-D15 delivers comparable results for just \$115, without the worry of pump failures, we're finding the H80i GT a bit of a tough sell. BENNETT RING 



VERDICT:

- Solid performance
- Link monitoring software
- Easy install

- Rather pricey

Shave \$30 off the price and this would be a no-brainer, but currently we think Noctua's NH-D15 is the better buy... provided it'll fit.

7

Deep Cool Captain 360

Three times the buzz


PRICE \$149
www.deepcool.com

Want the ultimate in performance yet don't mind a PC that sounds like a Black Hawk taking off every time it boots up? Look no further – the Captain 360 smashed the competition in every area, including how bloody loud it is.

We love the look of this thing, as the water pump has a slick transparent connection that shows the water flowing past your CPU, and the bold red/black design will look great through a Perspex side. While the water pump is nice and small, the huge radiator most certainly is not, measuring 390mm in length. It's built big to accommodate the three 120mm fans Deep Cool includes in this kit, which spin at 2200RPM. That's damn fast... and damn loud.

Deep Cool hasn't included any way to control these fan speeds, so unless your motherboard supports it, you're going to have to put up with the din of this thing in operation. It was easily the loudest

cooler in the test, pumping out an ear-shattering 59dB of combined fan and pump noise.

However, it was also the most powerful cooler in the roundup, keeping our steaming chip down to a cool 82C under load, while it peaked at just 30C while idling. And at only \$150, it's not a huge chunk of change to ensure your overclocked CPU stays safe. If only it wasn't so stupidly loud we'd have no hesitation in recommending it, but when a cooler is this loud, it's impossible to ignore, no matter how loud you've cranked your sound system. **BENNETT RING** 



- Looks slick
- Excellent Performance
- Affordable

- Insanely loud
- No fan control

VERDICT:

We think the sound of a cooler is just as important as its performance, and in this regard the Captain 360 is way too rowdy for our liking.

7

Noctua NH-D9L


Killing your CPU softly

PRICE \$85
www.noctua.at

We've been huge fans of Noctua's coolers ever since their beautifully crafted creations first crossed our testbench over a decade ago. Opening one of their boxes is similar to opening an Apple product; everything is immaculately presented and beautifully designed. They're priced relatively high, but their performance is usually impossible to fault. Which is why the NH-D9L was such a disappointment.

This air-cooler is designed to go in smaller cases, measuring just 11cm in height. This means it's a prime candidate for HTPCs or even 3U racks. Unlike bigger Noctua coolers, there's no risk of it scraping against your RAM or PCIe cards, as the footprint is only 95 x 95mm. It's got the same mounting system as other Noctua coolers, which is a breeze to install thanks to the beautifully clear instructions and packaging.

Only one fan is included in the box, and even though it spins at 2000RPM, it's incredibly quiet, measuring just 47dB. Unfortunately it doesn't seem to do a very good job. We were shocked to see our CPU temperature soar to its maximum safe temperature of 100C within seconds of firing up Prime95, causing the CPU to throttle down its speed so as not to burn out. The idle temp of 35C was also the highest in the roundup.

While this cooler is probably fine for stock CPUs, it's definitely not ready for overclocked chips in its current state. Performance might improve with another fan in place, but that's not what's in the box, so we can only review it as we received it. **BENNETT RING** 



- Whisper-quiet
- Relatively small
- Easy install

- Terrible performance on overclocked CPUs

VERDICT:

This quiet cooler just doesn't have the guts to keep an overclocked CPU cool.

5

Noctua NH-D15

Big and beautiful

PRICE \$115
www.noctua.at


This is the latest version of our favourite air-cooler of all time, the NH-D14. You're absolutely going to have to measure how much room you've got in your case, as this is insanely large, measuring 165mm tall by 150mm wide by 161mm deep.

Despite the size, Noctua has recessed the lower fins to allow it to fit over tall memory heatsinks, an issue that its predecessor suffered from. However, if you run it in twin fan mode like we did for our tests (two fans are included in the box), Noctua suggests sticking with standard 32mm height memory.

Weighing a whopping 1.32kg, this cooler puts some serious strain on your motherboard. As such, it's not really suitable for a PC that is going to be lugged around a lot, as moving it regularly could cause damage to the motherboard.

The twin fans spin at 1500RPM,

but Noctua includes a special cable that drops their speed to 1200RPM if you'd prefer a silent cooler. We tested the NH-D15 at top speed though, and were very impressed by its results. The load temperature of 86C was well within the safe zone for our CPU, putting it on par with Corsair's H110i GT All-in-One. It was slightly louder though, at 49dB versus the Corsair's 47dB, which will result in an audible hum while installed in a PC case.

If you've got the room for this behemoth, we think it's a ripper of a cooler. And the huge six year warranty stacks up well against the one year offered by most All-in-Ones, highlighting how much more reliable air-coolers are. **BENNETT RING** 



- Excellent performance
- Easy installation
- Not too loud

- Huge
- Heavy
- Expensive

VERDICT:

We loved its predecessor, and the improvements to RAM clearance makes the NH-D15 even better.

9

Thermaltake Water 3.0 Performer C

It doesn't get much cheaper than this


PRICE \$75
www.thermaltake.com.au

Seventy bucks for an All-in-One cooler is ridiculously cheap, so we expected some major issues with this cooler from Thermaltake. Thankfully there wasn't anything remarkably bad with this cooler, and it in fact offered rather decent performance for the price.

If there's one thing we have to take issue with, it's the complex and archaic mounting bracket. When combined with rather horrible instructions, installing this cooler was definitely the most taxing of the lot, but that still meant it only took 20 minutes to install rather than 10.

This All-in-One utilises a relatively small 120mm radiator, which should help it squeeze into smaller systems. The water block is tiny as well, considerably smaller than the likes of the Deep Cool Captain 360. While no

automatic fan control is included, Thermaltake provides a special cable that lowers the fan speed, and Thermaltake claims it drops fan noise by 47%. We must have overlooked this cable during our install, as we didn't see it, so tested the fan at its top speed of 2000RPM. Even at this speed this cooler isn't too noisy, coming in at 49dB, the same as the Noctua NH-D15.

Peak temp measured 91C, which is a little too warm for our liking, but still within the safe range of this CPU. Idle performance was smack bang in the middle of the pack, at 33C. Considering the extremely low price tag, this is actually rather good performance, though we'd probably not run a CPU 24/7 at these temps. **BENNETT RING** 



- Very cheap
- Solid performer
- Not too loud

- Horrible bracket design
- Woeful instructions

VERDICT:

If you're looking for a cheap All-in-One cooler that won't need to handle uber-overclocks, this cooler fits the bill.

7

SYNC or swim

Bennett Ring examines how Variable Refresh Rate tech has changed over the last year.



It's been over a year since we covered the first Variable Refresh Rate (VRR) technology to hit PC displays, in the form of NVIDIA's G-Sync. A lot has changed since then, first with the Video Electronics Standards Association (better known as VESA) announcing that its own version of the technology, Adaptive-Sync, would become an optional part of the DisplayPort 1.2a specification. AMD then utilised Adaptive-Sync to launch FreeSync, its direct competitor to G-Sync.

While we covered both technologies at launch, many of the issues that plagued Adaptive-Sync and FreeSync seem to be getting solved, and we're now in a position where there are around double the number of FreeSync displays on the market than G-Sync. There's also the confusing issue of where Adaptive-Sync fits into the picture – will it replace FreeSync, and will NVIDIA ever support it? So we caught up with staff from AMD, NVIDIA, VESA, AOC and BenQ to see just where this refresh rate rebellion stands at the moment. As you'll see, the debate between AMD and NVIDIA is fierce, so we'll try to read between the lines to tell you what's really going on.

VARIABLE REFRESH RATE THEORY 101

Before we begin, we'll give you a very quick primer on what VRR actually means, in case you missed our earlier features. Before VRR

came along, gamers had to make do with either Vertical Synchronisation enabled or disabled, aka V-Synch. Enabling it meant the GPU's update rate was tied to the screen's refresh rate, usually at 60Hz, which meant that only single, full frames would be drawn on screen. However, it also meant that the GPU had to stick to a framerate that was either tied to the display's refresh rate, or a neat division of it. For example, when running on a 60Hz screen, the game would run at either 60Hz or division of that, such as 30Hz. The benefit of V-Sync is that it removes screen tearing, the problem that occurs when two different frames are drawn onto a single screen refresh, which looks like there's a line running through the screen. However, V-Sync incurred the performance hit we just described, and also adds latency and stuttering, as it sometimes needs to pump out the same frame twice.

Disabling V-Sync removes this stuttering and latency, and also allows the GPU to spit out as many frames as it likes. However, this reintroduces the issue of screen tearing, which is ugly to say the least.

VRR removes this issue by forcing the screen to update only when the GPU has a frame ready for it. The screen's refresh rate dynamically alters to match the framerate of the game, and it removes all screen tearing, latency and stuttering. It also makes lower framerates look



The LG 34UM67 only offers VRR between 48Hz and 75Hz

smoother, even when a game is only running at 35 or 40fps.

So that's how VRR works, but the issue we're now faced with is that AMD and NVIDIA have both approached the problem differently. As a result, if you're in Team Green, your only VRR choice is G-Sync. If you're in Team Red, you have both Adaptive-Sync and FreeSync available to you. Let's take a look at where these technologies sit today in the Australian market.

DISPLAYPORT ADAPTIVE-SYNC – ONE STANDARD TO RULE THEM ALL?

Adaptive-Sync is one of the main reasons you're reading this article, as we noticed there was a huge amount of confusion about what it is, and how it relates to AMD's FreeSync. In the past we'd thought the two terms were interchangeable, but that doesn't appear to always be the case. AMD's FreeSync is built using the Adaptive-Sync spec, and AMD actually suggested Adaptive-Sync to VESA, but they're not identical entities.

According to Syed Athar Hussain, Display Domain Architect at AMD and VESA Board Vice Chairman, "The VESA Adaptive-Sync provides a flexible framework that allows the video source device to control the display's frame rate". It's an open specification that is an optional part of the DisplayPort 1.2a standard, which means that monitor makers don't have to pay a license

to use it. However, it does not specify the overall supported refresh rates, or the quality of the experience. Mr Hussain continues, "While Adaptive-Sync is a fully described display protocol specification published by VESA, it does not establish limits on parameters such as allowable frame rate and other related attributes. Adopters of Adaptive-Sync select parameter limits based on system and display capabilities."

Mr Hussain then explained that VESA expects Adaptive-Sync to become a brand unto itself. "VESA envisions Adaptive-Sync as a branded capability in the future, but at this point in time only AMD supports this feature on the Source side, so they are mostly promoting their brand...". Now, we know that FreeSync is built on Adaptive-Sync, so what's the difference between the two?

According to AMD's Rob Hallock, Head of Global Technical Marketing, "Adaptive-Sync is the standard that allows a graphics device to control the refresh rate of a display. But by itself Adaptive-Sync doesn't actually do anything for the user. It is merely a capability. A vendor still needs to come along and build a solution like FreeSync that actively provides an end-user benefit that incorporates the spec"

Despite this, Mr Hallock then confirmed that





**LG 29UM57 - \$429
sans FreeSync, \$465
with FreeSync**

■ The major benefit of FreeSync is that it leverages Adaptive-Sync, which has no licensing costs ■

any monitor that is flagged as Adaptive-Sync compatible - yet does not have AMD's FreeSync branding - will indeed work with FreeSync. He says, "Any DisplayPort Adaptive-Sync device will be compatible with an AMD graphics card, because we all use the DisplayPort Adaptive-Sync specification".

As a direct competitor to NVIDIA's G-Sync technology, which the company spent several years developing, it's no surprise that team green doesn't have the greatest things to say about Adaptive-Sync. Tom Petersen, Distinguished Engineer at NVIDIA claims that, "...there's not much to that spec. It's pretty much a spec that says how a monitor can tell a GPU what its range is. It doesn't deal with ghosting, or frame doubling or tripling, it's strictly a communication protocol for setup."

The benefit of Adaptive-Sync is that it's an open standard, with no licensing fees. However, the lack of quality control across the entire Adaptive-Sync experience means the quality of the Adaptive-Sync experience will likely be highly variable, at least until the technology matures. Now that you know where Adaptive-Sync fits into the picture, let's take a look at the technology that leverages it, AMD's FreeSync.

AMD'S FREESYNC - A ROCKY START

To say FreeSync had a bit of a tough beginning is something of an understatement. Initial

FreeSync displays only supported the VRR in a narrow zone of refresh rates, such as LG's 34UM67, which only offered it between 48Hz and 75Hz. Outside of that and the display would kick back into bog standard V-Sync on or off. Ghosting was also in issue, with screens such as BenQ's XL2730Z displaying motion trails or blur behind moving parts of the scene. It's likely that these issues were a result of AMD's hands-off approach when compared to G-Sync, where NVIDIA does QA testing across every component involved in a G-Sync display, before tailoring its proprietary scaler for each display. Mr Hallock clarified what this means. "The difference between us and NVIDIA is we let the manufacturer choose their low refresh rate and apply their own QA (Quality Assurance) process to determine whether or not LCD flicker is acceptable. Most of the manufacturers in the FreeSync ecosystem have said no, which explains the 30Hz bottom refresh rate."

Thankfully it seems that these issues are rapidly being solved. Nixeus is about to release the NX-VUE24 monitor which supports FreeSync between 30Hz and 144Hz, while BenQ solved its ghosting issues via the release of a firmware update which allowed its Overdrive function to operate during FreeSync mode.

The major benefit of FreeSync is that it leverages Adaptive-Sync, which has no licensing costs. It also doesn't require proprietary hardware. AMD's Mr Hallock revealed how existing premium scalars were basically already good for VRR. "What is true is that many of the scalars that were already being used by these manufacturers were in fact compatible with a dynamic refresh technology like DisplayPort's Adaptive-Sync. The critical missing component was a specification and a software standard that exposed these latent capabilities." As a result, FreeSync shouldn't add anything to the cost of a display, though we have seen very slight price increases on FreeSync displays in Australia. LG's non-FreeSync 29UM57-P 29-inch display sells for \$429, while the FreeSync enabled version is just \$465, a tiny increase.

As a result of its low cost and open standard, the number of FreeSync panels has exploded, with 21 units on the market as of the end of July. Not bad considering FreeSync has only been around for four months, while NVIDIA's 20 month-old G-Sync technology is currently limited to just 13 displays. Still, there's the issue of what happens once FreeSync falls below 30Hz, the current minimum supported by FreeSync displays. AMD has plans to resolve this according to Mr Hallock. "We intend to talk more about our low render rate solutions soon. Regardless of the display, however, it's widely understood that <30 FPS gaming is unplayable regardless of the display. There simply aren't enough frames to convey smooth motion, so

**The Nixeus NX-VUE24
supports FreeSync
between 30Hz and
144Hz**



chasing solutions for these cases seems like an exercise in futility that can be solved through a more reasonable GPU/game pairing." We have to agree, as even G-Sync starts to feel sluggish once the frame rate drops below 30fps.

While FreeSync is currently shaping up to deliver a much better experience across a wider range of displays, Mr Hallock would be happy for FreeSync to disappear, and Adaptive-Sync to become the industry standard. "That effectively means that the efforts we worked very hard on in the display ecosystem have come to fruition and have won the day, that everybody is now working with an open, interoperable standard rather than haves versus have nots. I think that would be a good thing for everybody in the industry, especially consumers." Let's see what NVIDIA has to say about that.

NVIDIA'S G-SYNC – A PRICEY, PROPRIETARY YET PREMIUM EXPERIENCE

Unlike Adaptive-Sync and FreeSync, NVIDIA's G-Sync requires proprietary hardware to operate, in the form of a custom scaler in the display. While the cost of this is rumoured to be around US\$100 to US\$150, it has led to an even higher premium in Australia. According to Josh Edwards, Sales and Marketing Coordinator at BenQ Australia, Aussie gamers have to pay \$200 to \$300 extra for a G-Sync display. In fact, the cost was so high at G-Sync's launch, that when combined with the high exchange rate at the time, BenQ Australia didn't release G-Sync panels in Australia. Josh explained, "...when we were looking at bringing in the XL2420G originally... it would just end up costing too much. So we had to get support from our headquarters in order to bring it here due to demand."


From a manufacturing perspective, the other major difference with G-Sync is that NVIDIA conducts Quality Assurance on all G-Sync displays to ensure a rock-solid experience. Tom Petersen, Distinguished Engineer at NVIDIA, detailed what this means. "So that means we do the monitor, the module, and we test all that stuff, from driver through GPU through monitor. We know that if there's a problem, it's on NVIDIA." This is in stark contrast to Adaptive-Sync, which has a hands-off approach, whereas FreeSync seems to sit somewhere in the middle.

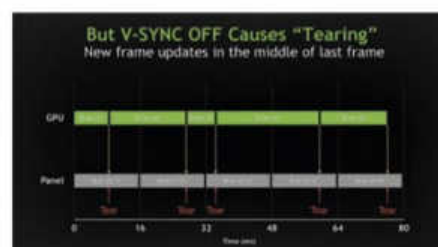
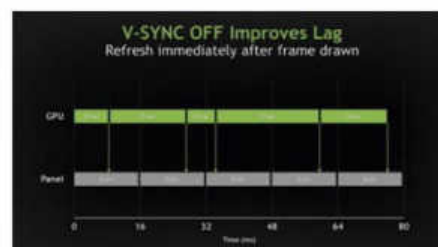
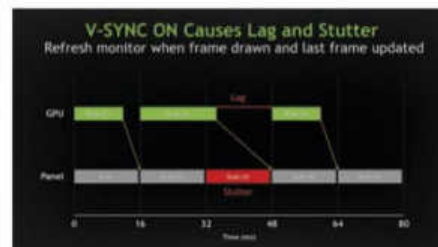
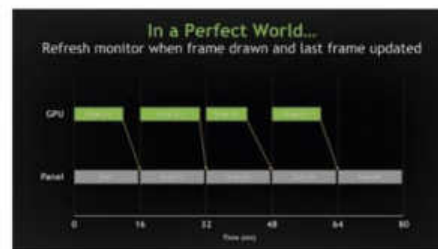
A key difference in the actual technology of G-Sync is its ability to handle lower frame rates, which is why it was the preferred choice when the first FreeSync panels struggled with these same sub-40 frame rates. LCD panels start to flicker when their screens aren't updated frequently, usually below 30Hz or so. G-Sync solves this issue by frame doubling, tripling or quadrupling when the monitor hits its designated minimum refresh rate. This minimum varies by each display, but let's

use a display with a minimum 30Hz refresh rate as an example. Once the game starts outputting at 29 frames per second, G-Sync starts doubling the screen's refresh rate, up to 58Hz. This means flickering is not an issue. Tom suggests that this gives G-Sync a huge edge over FreeSync. "If you're FreeSync and the render rate drops below the minimum refresh rate of the monitor, it shifts to a traditional mode where they're synchronised to the refresh rate, like 60Hz, and they're either going to tear or stutter." However, we're now seeing FreeSync displays that operate between the 30Hz and 144Hz range, and we'd argue that even G-Sync doesn't offer a very good gaming experience below 35Hz.

NVIDIA spent several years developing G-Sync, so it's no surprise that it doesn't intend to support Adaptive-Sync in the near future. When asked if NVIDIA could roll out Adaptive-Sync support to existing products, Mr Petersen stated, "I'm not honestly certain of that. I can speculate and say that as far as I can tell after looking at the tech, what Adaptive-Sync is, it is a method for a monitor to communicate to a GPU, and it's very likely that we can change our GPUs to understand that communication, but there's a lot more going on." However, he claims that without the G-Sync scaler and NVIDIA QA, it wouldn't live up to NVIDIA's reputation. "The experience that an Adaptive-Sync monitor would deliver even when attached to an NVIDIA GPU, is likely not at the quality level that NVIDIA wants."

CONCLUSION

To sum it up, here's where VRR displays stand today. NVIDIA doesn't think Adaptive-Sync or FreeSync is a threat to its proprietary standard G-Sync. Yet FreeSync has been adopted by a wider range of displays in a much shorter window than G-Sync, but it's anybody's guess as to how FreeSync versus G-Sync sales compare. The initial problems of Adaptive-Sync seem to be well on the way to being resolved as monitor makers get their head around better quality scalers and panels, while we can expect Adaptive-Sync branded displays to hit the market soon, which will work fine with FreeSync. We've got a hunch that Adaptive-Sync will take over as the dominant standard, especially if Intel decides to support it, but the million dollar question is if and when will NVIDIA offer Adaptive-Sync support. We get the feeling it'll be possible for them to enable it on existing products via a firmware or driver update, but we don't expect NVIDIA to give up on G-Sync for at least a year. In the meantime, your decision about which technology to use is most likely to be determined by the GPU you own, rather than the choice of VRR technology you prefer. 



How G-Sync works - it's full of science and picture things!



LAPTOP

Lenovo 512GB SSD Lenovo Y50-70

Another middle-of-the-road machine

PRICE \$2199

www.lenovo.com/au

It's been a while since I've seen a gaming laptop from Lenovo, so I jumped at the chance to check out its refurbished Y50 model. Given how tough the gaming laptop market is at the moment, with MSI and Aorus offering killer laptops, I was very interested to see how the Y50 would perform, especially with its rather friendly price point.

Despite the low-ish price, the Y50 exudes a premium air. It's got a very sleek, minimalist approach to the case, and the brushed metal exterior suggests it'll handle a beating. A nice soft-touch rubberised surface is used around the keyboard. The 15.6 inch display is a standard 1080p jobbie, and it's here that I noticed the first issue with this laptop. It appears quite blurry, lacking the crispness that a 1080p display of this size should have, while the contrast performance just isn't up to snuff. At default settings it's horribly dark, but increasing the brightness led to a washed out appearance. Considering just how important the screen is to the gaming experience, it's very disappointing to see such a lacklustre panel used on the Y50. The keyboard is

nice backlit and generally comfortable to use thanks to its large size, but I found the touchpad lacked accuracy, proving difficult to use.

Lenovo has equipped this laptop with an interesting speaker system. Supplied by JBL, the twin stereo speakers are supplemented by a tiny subwoofer on the underside of the base. It's not going to cause your neighbours to complain during those midnight gaming sessions, but it definitely makes the built-in speakers above average compared to the tinny rubbish found on most laptops. Serious gamers are still advised to use headphones though.

For a 15.6" laptop, the Y50 is neither here nor there when it comes to the weight or slimness. It's 24mm deep, which isn't huge but also isn't record breaking. The weight of 2.4kg is similarly pretty bog standard. Its specifications are similarly middle-of-the-road. The Intel Core i7 4710HQ processor can be found in countless gaming laptops, where its top Turbo boost speed of 3.5GHz proves more than capable for most games. 16GB of DDR3 is ample for a gaming laptop, while this sample

came with a single SSD installed. It's generously large at 512GB in size, but it'd be nice to have a secondary 1TB mechanical drive for slower files such as movies or images.

NVIDIA's ubiquitous GTX 960M is tasked with driving the display, and as we've seen in the past it offers respectable performance. As our benchmark results show, it's not going to break any world records, and it's possible to pick up competing 960M-powered laptops for around \$500 cheaper, such as MSI's GE62. When this fact is combined with its rather ordinary display, sadly the Y50 doesn't quite compete. While the build quality is great, and the SSD size generous, it's overpriced for a GTX 960M-powered laptop with a questionable screen. **BENNETT RING**

- Well built
- Decent specs
- Big SSD

- Horrible display
- Overpriced
- Average touchpad

VERDICT:

Unfortunately the Y50 is priced well above similarly specced machines, despite having a rather ordinary screen.

6

GRID AUTOSPORT Benchmarks

1080p, Ultra Detail

Min FPS Avg FPS



SHADOW OF MORDOR Benchmarks

1080p, Ultra Detail

Min FPS Avg FPS



3DMARK Firestrike

Firestrike

Score





WHEEL

Logitech G29 Steering Wheel and Pedals

The G27 gets a facelift

PRICE \$489
www.logitech.com/au

It's been six long years since Logitech introduced the popular G27 steering wheel, and a lot has changed since then. The PS4 has become the console of choice for serious gamers looking to supplement their PC addiction, while Fanatec and Thermaltake both shook up the steering wheel world with their monumental leap forwards in force feedback technology... and prices. Logitech's answer to these changes is the G29, a revamped version of the G27.

For five hundred bucks you get a wheel and pedal kit that is compatible with both the PS4 and PC. Note that PS4 compatibility is a bit of a grey area – developers are free to code support for older controllers into their games, despite early talk of wheels needing a special security chip to function, which has since been proven to be untrue. Unlike the G27, Logitech has removed the six-speed shifter from the base kit, which you'll have to fork out another \$80 for. Thankfully the G27's shifter will work with it if you've got the old wheel, though we doubt you'll want to upgrade to the G29 if that's the case.

Logitech has used Hall Effect sensors in place of the optical sensors of the G27, which use magnetic detection to apparently deliver a more precise,

accurate wheel. In practice we didn't notice a lick of difference between the G27 and G29's accuracy, with both feeling identical. However, the Hall Effect sensors should apparently last better over time, though our six year old G27 still feels fine to us. Force feedback effects are delivered by twin motors, and once again it feels just like the old G27. That's to say that it does a decent job, but lacks the incredibly fine detail of Fanatec's offerings or the Thrustmaster T500RS, the latter of which is admittedly much more expensive.

The one major difference in feel is the brake pedal. The pedal kit is identical to the G27 from what we can gather, except for a small rubber insert into the brake. This simulates the progressive feel of a real brake pedal, but it's a very crude representation compared to the hydraulic methods employed elsewhere.

The only other major change from a user's perspective is the huge number of buttons that now adorn the face, which make it 100% PS4 compatible. There are 24 in total, and they can all be programmed via Logitech's intuitive Gaming Software.

The biggest competitor to the G29 is the existing G27, which can be purchased for just \$300, and that

■ For five hundred bucks you get a wheel and pedal kit that is compatible with both the PS4 and PC ■

includes a shifter. Considering the two wheels feel basically identical, and a rubber mod can convert the old G27 brake pedal to feel just like the G29's for less than twenty bucks, we simply can't see a reason for users to upgrade. This just feels like a mild update on an existing product, for a huge price rise. On the other hand, we wish Logitech would relaunch its beautiful G940 HOTAS Joystick and Throttle kit, as it's one of the best force feedback sticks on the market. Now that's something we'd be happy to pay a 2015 price tag for...

BENNETT RING 🇬🇧

- PS4 compatible
- Better brake feeling
- Lots of buttons

- No shifter
- Feels same as G27
- Costs \$200 more than G27

VERDICT:

Why buy this when you can pick up the G27 for \$200 less, which also includes a shifter?

6



WHEEL

Logitech G920 Driving Force

Logitech attempts to reinvent the wheel once more

PRICE \$499
www.logitech.com

After a five year absence from the racing wheel peripheral market, Logitech have finally developed two successors to the immensely popular G27 racing wheel.

One of these is the Logitech G920 Driving Force, designed for PC and Xbox One. In combination with the Logitech G29, which is aimed at PlayStation 4 owners, these represent Logitech's new range of racing wheels, designed to mix it up with the likes of Thrustmaster and Fanatec for those seeking the best way to play racing games.

Visually, the G920 doesn't represent a major departure from the design of the G27. As the wheel is aimed for use on the Xbox One, the button design is taken directly from an Xbox controller, with all the face buttons and shoulder triggers making an appearance on the face of the wheel. Nearly everything else is similar to the G27, including the wonderful hand-stitched leather finish and the solid stainless steel paddle shifters and pedals.

The only major difference hardware-wise is the H-shifter that was included with the G27 is now a separate purchase, which hurts the value for those looking for the most realistic experience when driving manual cars.

That being said, for those looking to upgrade from the G27 to the G920, the G27 shifter is compatible with the new wheel, making a purchase of the new shifter unnecessary.

Instead of opting for a belt drive system used in many other wheels, Logitech have stuck with the helical-cut gear driven system from the G27. This gives the wheel a similar feeling to the G27 when turning, which may feel slightly bumpy compared to the smooth operation of belt-driven wheels. However, this small detail is not likely to effect your enjoyment of the wheel itself, nor will belt-driven wheels magically reduce your lap times in racing games.

However, don't mistake this wheel as being a re-badged G27 for the new generation of consoles. Internally, the wheel has undergone changes based on feedback from G27 users, and they show.

New to the G920 are hall-effect sensors. Compared to the optical sensors of Logitech's previous wheels, these new magnetic sensors are designed for higher precision, with little to no wear that affects Logitech wheels after years of use.

Logitech have persisted with the dual-motor force feedback system from the G27, however this time around the

Logitech have addressed one of the key complaints of G27 owners, the force feedback deadzone

noisy clanking when the wheel vibrates has been significantly reduced, both in terms of occurrence and volume. It hasn't been totally eliminated, meaning it is still a louder experience than the similarly priced Thrustmaster T300, but for those used to the house-shaking G27 rattling, the G920 will immediately sound quieter. This is impressive considering the actual strength of the force feedback has been given a small increase this time around too.

In addition, Logitech have addressed one of the key complaints of G27 owners, the force feedback deadzone. This is most noticeable when slight FFB effects can not be felt through the wheel, especially in the centre of the axis where nuanced FFB effects are common. The G27 had this issue apply to upwards of first 20% of the force feedback capacity, making the wheel feel lifeless when driving on straights and fast corners.



The G920 has not removed this deadzone, but it has significantly tightened it, aligning it very closely with deadzones on similarly priced wheels on the market. The deadzone is now barely noticeable, with games previously struggling with the issue now feeling much more livelier.

The pedals have also undergone significant improvements. While the accelerator and the clutch pedals have remained the same from the G27, the brake pedal has been redesigned. The G920 now features a heavy, non-linear brake pedal, which now responds to the pressure applied instead of calculating the braking force by the distance the pedal has been pushed.

This creates a similar feeling to the brakes on actual racing cars and encourages better braking techniques, as it's harder to lock up but more natural to find consistency under braking. This new brake isn't as accurate as those using load cell sensors featured in some high-end wheel sets, but it is still a major improvement on the G27 pedals and makes the pedals included with the T300 feel amateurish by comparison.

For all that is done right on the hardware side, the software is

disappointing. While support on Xbox One is spot on for all games that support force feedback wheels, support for the G920 on PC is a mess at the time of writing. This is mostly due to issues with the Logitech Gaming Software program providing drivers that are simply not compatible with many games.

No game has properly working force feedback, instead providing a universal wheel weight that doesn't correspond to the action on screen. Only Euro Truck Simulator 2 and F1 2015 are exceptions to this. The software itself is bare-bones compared with the software used with the G27 as well, with no ability to fine tune the wheel outside of changing the rotation limit of the wheel and the sensitivity of the pedals. However, given that the G920 doesn't release until October, I am confident this can be rectified before then.

For those looking for their first wheel, the G920 is a great choice, as it provides the best overall package for a wheel underneath \$500. The G27 may be significantly cheaper these days, but the improvements to the wheel and

pedals make the newer range worth the added premium, even when there is no H-shifter included. The rival T300 and TX wheels from Thrustmaster are belt-driven, quieter, and retail for around the same price as the G920, but both are let down by very poor pedals and neither include a stick shifter as well.

For those who already own a G27 for PC, the decision is much tougher. The improvements from the G27 are noticeable, but the price point hurts the case for upgrading, especially when you could upgrade to the fantastic Thrustmaster T500 for a few hundred dollars more. **JUSTIN TALENT PC**

- Lovely leather finish
- No more deadzone!
- Improved pedals

- Still a tad noisy
- No H-shifter included
- Price

VERDICT:

A great wheel and pedal set that is slightly let down by a steep price and software issues. Highly recommended for those looking to buy their first wheel.

8

HOTWARE²⁴³

with Terrence Jarrad

01 Marshall Smartphone

Price: \$TBA • Distributor: Marshall

www.marshallheadphones.com

Known for high quality audio gear, Marshall is throwing its name at a phone, and naturally, is focussing on making the audio experience that much better.

POWERED UP: Twin front facing speakers, a scroll wheel volume control, and two stereo jacks (two!! No more awful adapters when you want to share music!), and a separate Cirrus Logic WM8281 Audio hub codec included for playing music at high resolution, with FLAC support.

PLAYED OUT: Audio focus means sacrifices in other areas such as camera, and... waterproofing?

02 Luna Smart Mattress Cover

Price: \$350+ • Distributor: Luna

Lunasleep.com

While it might seem we're reaching for what can justifiably be tagged "smart", this mattress cover from Luna actually makes a lot of sense.

POWERED UP: Measures your heart rate, breathing rate, and sleep phases, learns your sleeping habits and adjusting to suit, heating when needed (with dual zones so there's no need to compromise!), waking you in your lightest cycle of sleep, and communicating with other smart devices to simplify getting to sleep and waking up as much as possible. Oh, and control it all from your phone.

PLAYED OUT: Designed to integrate with Nest? Great, now Google is watching you sleep too.

03 TL3 Racing Simulator

Price: \$74,000 • Distributor: Motion

Simulation

www.motionsimulation.com

Ever wanted to race cars, but are terrified of actually hurling yourself around a track at high speeds? Here. Have this.

POWERED UP: Developed with an F1 team, this simulator incorporates an impressive 200 degree "seamless" display over 2.5m wide comprised of three separate projectors. Variable driving



position means you can switch from rally to F1, and feel like you might actually be in those cars, especially when you throw in the heave, pitch, and roll, motion system.

PLAYED OUT: You could literally buy a track car and have change left to do something else, instead... say, build yourself a racing simulator.

04 Canary Home Security

Price: \$350 • Distributor: Canary Connect

canary.is

Miners used keep canaries down in the mines to serve as an early warning system, as toxic gasses would affect or kill the bird before harming them. So as you toil in the coal mine of your home, it might be a good idea to have one of these nearby, ready to die for you.

POWERED UP: A learning security device that keeps you abreast of goings on in your home, sending texts and videos, as well as allowing you to watch live. Canary also measures temperature, humidity, and air quality, and has a speaker with a 90+dB siren to warn off potential intruders.

PLAYED OUT: Undoubtedly triggered by pudgy tats.



05 MLife Streaming Amplifier

Price: \$66,000 • Distributor: D'Agostino

dandagostino.com

We've always lamented the lack of audiophile grade amplifiers that look like steampunk espresso machines, but luckily Daniel D'Agostino heard our pained cries, and brought this monstrosity to life.

POWERED UP: Doesn't skimp on quality to fit all the fancy WiFis in. AirPlay, Bluetooth, Internet radio, pumped through a 32bit/192KHz PCM/DSD digital to analog converter. Plays as easily from co-ax and optical as it does from USB and UPnP, with a 5-inch LCD showing you what's going on.

PLAYED OUT: Doesn't make espresso.



DXR4CER

DXR4CER® KING SERIES GAMING CHAIR

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MENAGERIE

This month sees new coolers for two builds, while our budget baby gets a dose of AMD's new R9 380. Finally, 4K makes its debut in the Premium build.

BUDGET

The perfect entry-level gaming PC

CPU

AMD FX-4300 Quad Core
3.8GHz 4 Core Black Edt.

\$145 www.amd.com

We're sticking with AMD's budget beauty.



MOBO

ASRock 980DE3/
U3S3 AM3+

\$69 www.asrock.com.au

Our CPU needs a new ASRock home.



RAM

Gell 8GB Kit DDR3 Evo
Veloce C9 1600MHz

\$85 www.gell.com.tw

In with the cheapest we can find



VIDEO

PowerColor R9 380
PCS+ 4GB

\$349 www.sapphiretech.com

AMD's new 960 killer



POWER

Cooler Master
Thunder 500W

\$66 www.coolermaster.com

The budget beast doesn't need a lot of juice



SOUND

Sennheiser HD201
+ ASUS Xonar DG

\$38 + \$33 www.sennheiser.com

Headphones plus soundcard – yes!



OPTICAL

Lite-on DVD-RW

\$49 www.us.liteonit.com

We'd happily retire the drive, but some of you guys still believe in physical media.



STORAGE

Toshiba DTO1ACA050
500GB HDD

\$59 www.toshiba.com.au

Half a Terabyte should handle everything.



DISPLAY

Samsung 24"
S24D300H

\$189 www.samsung.com

Crystal clear 1920 x 1080 res gaming



CASE

BitFenix Shinobi

\$95 www.bitfenix.com

Nice for the price. This is the little brother of the case used in our Performance build.



KEYBOARD

Tt eSPORTS Challenger

\$49 www.thermaltake.com.au

Built for PC gamers. Macros, shortcuts, the lot.



MOUSE

Gigabyte M6900

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TOTAL: \$1,232

PERFORMANCE

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CPU

Intel 4th Generation
Core i5-4670K +
Noctua NH-D15

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MOBO

MSI Z97M-G43

\$139 www.msi.com.tw

Z97 doesn't get cheaper than this.



RAM

Gell 8GB Kit DDR3 Evo
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VIDEO

Galaxy GTX970-4GD5

\$499 www.galaxytechus.com

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POWER

Corsair VS650

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SOUND

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ATH-A500X
w/ASUS Xonar DG

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OPTICAL

Lite-on DVD-RW

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STORAGE

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DISPLAY

BenQ XL2411T

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CASE

Fractal Design Define R5

\$159 www.fractal-design.com

Our new favourite mid-tower.



KEYBOARD

Logitech G710+

\$139 www.thermaltake.com.au

Logi's new mechanical board is one for them to beat.



MOUSE

Logitech G502
Proteus

\$59 www.logitech.com

Deadly accurate and super comfortable.



TOTAL: \$2,474

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Crank everything to Ultra, including your credit limit

CPU

Intel 4th Generation Core
i7-4790K + Corsair H110i
GT Water Cooling Kit

\$469 + \$179 www.intel.com



MOBO

ASUS Maximus VII
Ranger

\$249 www.asus.com.au

One of our favourite Z97 boards



RAM

G.SKILL 16Gb (2x 8Gb)
DDR3-1600

\$165 www.gskill.com

16GB for our Premium PC



VIDEO

2 X Gigabyte
GV-N980WF30C-4GD
GeForce GTX 980 4GB

\$1500 www.gigabyte.com.au



POWER

Corsair HX1000i

\$299 www.corsair.com

A high end PSU to ensure stable overlocks.



SOUND

Audio Technica
ATH-ADG1 headphones

\$249 www.audio-technica.com

We've ditched the soundcard



OPTICAL

Pioneer Optical Disc
Drive (ODD) Internal
Blu-ray Combo Drive

\$118 www.pioneer.com.au



STORAGE

W.D. Caviar Black 1TB +
Samsung SSD 850 EVO
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DISPLAY

ASUS PB287Q 27"
4K display

\$739 www.asus.com.au

4K is now a reality



CASE

NZXT Switch 810 Full

Tower \$185 www.nzxt.com

It's big, it's beautiful, and it's also nice and quiet.



KEYBOARD

Corsair K70 RGB

\$235 www.corsair.com

This is PCPP's favourite keyboard, case closed.



MOUSE

Logitech G502
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Deadly accurate and super comfortable.



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**Intel 4th Generation Core i7 4790K
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www.pccasegear.com.au



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MOBO

**Gigabyte Z97X Gaming G1
WiFi Black Edition**

\$479 www.gigabyte.com.au

This high end Z97-based board has plenty of room for more GPUs when you decide to upgrade, and it's chock full of extras



STORAGE

**2 x Samsung SSD 850
EVO 1TB, 3 x WD 1TB
Velociraptor**

\$1000 + \$1000

www.wdc.com

www.samsung.com



RAM

**Corsair Dominator
Platinum 4 x 4GB DDR3
2400MHz**

\$338 www.corsair.com

It doesn't get much faster than this.



DISPLAY

Epson TW9200W

\$3800

www.epson.com.au

Beautiful 1920 x 1080 gaming. Unfortunately you won't be able to do 3D gaming at anything higher than 720p due to the limitations of HDMI 1.4.



VIDEO

**3 x Asus GeForce
GTX Titan X**

\$5217 www.asus.com.au

Even one of these cards is insane.



CASE

**Cooler Master Cosmos II
Ultra Tower**

\$379

www.coolermaster.com

It's big, it's beautiful, and it's also nice and quiet. The compartmentalised interior ensures everything runs ice-cool.



POWER

**Silverstone
1500wST1500 Strider**

\$315 www.silverstone.com

1500W should be plenty for the three GPUs running alongside an overclocked CPU, as well as the storage within.



INPUT DEVICES

**SteelSeries Sensei RAW optical +
Xbox 360 USB Wireless Dongle +
Xbox 360 wireless controller**

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KEYBOARD

Corsair K70 RGB

\$235

www.corsair.com

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+ Marantz SR5009 amp**

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www.eastwoodhifi.com.au



JOYSTICK

Logitech G940

\$385

www.logitech.com

This Force Feedback set is getting harder to find, but it's still the finest flight controller around.



OPTICAL

**Pioneer Optical Disc Drive
(ODD) Internal Blu-ray
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\$118 www.pioneer.com.au

Putting in a Blu-ray drive allows it to double as a powerful media box.



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Ultra-fast 802.11ac Wi-Fi router
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CROSSING STREAMS

ASHLEY MCKINNON likes everything on demand



Yes, everyone is talking about Netflix. Australia has lagged behind the rest of the world in terms of viewing choices but no more. If you've got yourself a decent internet connection (with plenty of download limit) then the world of Internet streaming TV and Movies is knocking at your door. Many of the latest TV's and Bluray players come with built in Netflix apps but what about the rest of us plebs without the latest tech. Another device will be needed to be able to stream Netflix into our living rooms.

There are several media streaming devices that will fit the bill. As Netflix can be run from an App, any Android or Apple IOS based media device that can download from their respective app store can run Netflix. Some others exist as well, that have their own versions of the Netflix App – but it's not solely about Netflix – there's a whole world of viewing options out there. Other providers such as Hulu, Crackle, HBO Go and also Presto and Stan here in Australia offer up way more content than you could possibly hope to watch in your lifetime.

AMAZON FIRE TV – Though not available locally (yet), you can order the Amazon Fire TV online from Amazon itself. It is a small square black Android based media player, that when you buy comes with 1 year subscription to Amazon Prime. Like Netflix, Amazon Prime holds thousands of Movies and TV Programs, all streamable over the internet. Getting Netflix to run is as simple as installing the Netflix App from the Amazon store and then entering your login details. The Amazon App store also has installers for Hulu, Crackle and various other Streaming providers. A limitation of the device is that you cannot access the Google Playstore directly (can be achieved through some hacking though) meaning any apps you have already purchased for your phone or tablet on Google won't be available to install on the Amazon box.

The device is Wired and Wireless ready, with a single USB 2.0 port allowing you to play media directly from external storage. There is also a Games Controller available from Amazon to allow you to play any installed Android games – though you can play most games with the standard Amazon Fire TV remote.

There is also a scaled down version of the Amazon Fire TV called the Fire TV Stick, which you simply plug into your TV's empty HDMI port. This is Wifi only and can do almost everything it's larger brother can do, albeit slightly slower.



GOOGLE NEXUS PLAYER – The Google Nexus Player is very similar to the Amazon Fire TV but being a Google product you have full access to the Google Play Store. Netflix, Hulu, Presto and any other streaming provider apps that available on the Play Store can be installed on the Nexus Player. Google also has their own assortment of TV and Movies available for download and just like with the Amazon Fire TV, you can use the remote to do a voice search – though like Amazon this is limited to its own media collection (you cannot voice search Netflix or other providers).

Available locally (JB HIFI, Dick Smith) or purchase from the Google Playstore, you can also buy a game controller for it to play your Android games (it runs a Quad core atom

■ Many of the latest TV's and Bluray players come with built in Netflix apps ■

processor so games will run just as well as on your Phone or Tablet). A single micro USB slot is available so support for plugging in your own media is very limited.

APPLE TV – Apples answer is the Apple TV – a device that's been around for a couple of years now and is currently on its 3rd implementation. Similar in size to the Amazon Fire TV and the Google Nexus Player, the Apple TV runs iOS so those with an iPhone or iPad will feel right at home with its interface. The Apple Appstore has a Netflix app, as well as apps for other streaming providers like Hulu, Presto and others.

The Apple TV comes with the familiar silver Apple Remote and navigating its interface is very straight forward. People love Apple devices


The Google Nexus player can stream anything there is an app for and also plays games

for their usability and the Apple TV certainly builds upon that.

The main drawback with the Apple TV is you cannot playback your own media via USB or the likes of PLEX or Kodi (formerly XBMC). If this doesn't phase you however then the Apple TV is a rock solid device running a very slick interface.

ROKU 3 – Another long term player in this space is Roku – with their latest offering being the Roku 3. Unfortunately it isn't available to buy in Australian shops but can be easily purchase over the internet. The Roku 3 runs a proprietary operating system, and because Roku has been around for quite a while there are hundreds of Apps available to install. Netflix, Hulu and plenty of others are simple click away, but because the Roku 3 is a US and Europe market device there are no installs for Australian providers such as Presto or Stan.

Also, while the Roku 3 does have an SD card slot and USB port allowing you to plug in and play your own media files, it doesn't natively support the AVI format (which in this day and age seems crazy). This may also cause some problems if you are using Plex or Kodi to stream your own media as AVI files simply won't play.

Take Note – We have mentioned Hulu and some other providers several times here and it must be noted in order to be able to access them you need to do some network trickery. Netflix, Presto and Stan are fine as they are Australia based but some others are Geo locked to the USA so you have to fool your device into thinking that's where it is physically located. This can easily be done by using a service like Getflix (www.getflix.com.au) which makes your device appear to be located in the USA. This then makes the other providers think you are local to them and let you stream their media. 

PCPP COMPS

Welcome to the PCPP competitions page! With the office positively overflowing in PC gaming goodies, it's become so difficult to do our ridiculously awesome jobs that we decided to pass the savings onto you. And by savings, we mean free stuff. Games, collectibles, swag, and all kinds of media that screams PC gaming. Or perhaps those are the screams of the intern trapped under the boxes of giveaways. Only one way to save them: Head to www.pcpowerplay.com.au to enter!

To find the competitions, simply mouse over the "Community" tab in the main menu at the top of the homepage, and click on "Competitions". Click through to each individual competition page, fill out the form (be sure to agree to the terms and conditions) and you'll be in the running to win! Keep an eye out for this page in future issues of PCPP, as we roll out new competitions every month!

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1

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▶ **What other beach animal should make peripherals?**

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10

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SONY



Fast & Furious 7

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TO ENTER:

Head to www.pcpowerplay.com.au
In 25 words or less, answer the following question:

▶ **Who should play the villain in Fast & Furious 8?**

WINNERS James Blair, ACT wins out Win an Instant Games Collection subscriptions prize!

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In 25 words or less, what is the greatest PC game of all time, and why?

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Overcooked Stakes

JOSHUA LUNDBERG is the last, best hope for humanity

The trailers will slam you with them. The posters will remind you of them. The products themselves will jam them down your throat and explode your eyeballs with them. If they're not bigger and broader next time it just won't do, and next time they'll make your heart explode.

They're stakes. And film franchises are trending toward raising them again and again.

What's interesting to me is the interactive medium of videogames is broadening them - without necessarily raising them.

In recent years I've found myself increasingly detached from the most popular films that are released, and although I most certainly suffer from superhero fatigue, the common factor in the films I've loved has been low stakes.

What are low stakes? This question depends on the perspective of the drama. The highest stake for a single human being is their life or those of loved ones; in another narrative the lives of a thousand people may seem expendable next to the prospect of planetary annihilation.

So, even when comparing the cost of failure in *Portal* to the consequences of failure in *Mass Effect*, the stakes feel incredibly high; it's how developers make us care that influences how much tension we feel when faced with what lies at stake.

Although many videogames revolve around saving a city, country, world, galaxy or universe, many great games of late have been about smaller, personal stories.

Interestingly, stakes in videogames aren't always based in the narrative.

With the big hitters, however, they often are.

Franchises like *Call of Duty* are consumed by the very one-upmanship the *Marvel* franchise suffers, and *Activision* clearly have no interest in a release that could act as a circuit breaker.

It's easy to take this route, because videogames provide limitless possibilities, just as *Anime* does - neither are bound by challenging requirements to suspend our disbelief. Certainly not in the same way as mainstream cinema.

Gameplay can also create stakes for a player without a structured, linear narrative.

Let's use *Seven Days to Die* as an example; in a game where the player joins

a server without any story and fights to survive the stakes are generate by the gameplay mechanics.

The game responds to death by stripping the player of all their items and gear and leaving them in a backpack that can be stolen or destroyed. For a player in this situation these stakes are phenomenally high - for the player raiding their backpack they're virtually non-existent.

The same moment. Vastly different stakes.

This is why I am fascinated by stakes in non-narrative, non-linear gaming. In a film or a heavily restrictive game narrative the stakes will be the same for every player; the outcome of each event will have the same response across the board.

For me the risk of a single *Kerbal* astronaut dying in *Kerbal Space Program* is terrifying. I can't let a *Kerbal* die in space, as Ed Harris says in *Apollo 13*, "on my watch."

■ ■ We simply do not need the threat of world destruction or universal death to feel invested ■ ■

I've written numerous times before about my relationship with *KSP*; I make up back stories for every *Kerbal*, I 'play' as a child does with their toys by creating my own narrative for the program. These are features of my imagination - the game offers nothing like it at all. In career it offers progression, but it is limited strictly to gameplay progression.

In *Kerbal* I make my own stakes - deep, emotional - entirely in my own mind.

There are numerous examples and many of them are very simple human interactions within competitive environments; the emotional consequences of losing a round of *League of Legends* to some people are as deep and visceral as me losing a *Kerbal*.

It's unique, this medium that can have two hugely differing approaches to creating stakes for consumers - it is by virtue of interaction that it is possible.

For gameplay-generated stakes there is nothing but the player's feeling about their

relationship with the game that make them stakes at all.

For narrative-generated stakes it is the player's perception that the outcome of failure will result in, say, the end of the world that makes the player care enough to continue.

The latter is a very traditional approach to storytelling that requires basic tropes of narrative such as an inciting incident and compelling characters with clear objectives and obstacles both internal and external.

It appears irregular to execute both means for creating tension, although I am sure players of brutally difficult games like *Dark Souls* would disagree. Then again, it is an irregular game.

It's difficult to develop narrative-driven games with low stakes that are incredibly involving, but *Rockstar* is adept and doing just that. It's sad that possibly the greatest game I've played featuring solely personal stakes isn't available on PC; hopefully *Red Dead Redemption* will one day grace our computers with its presence.

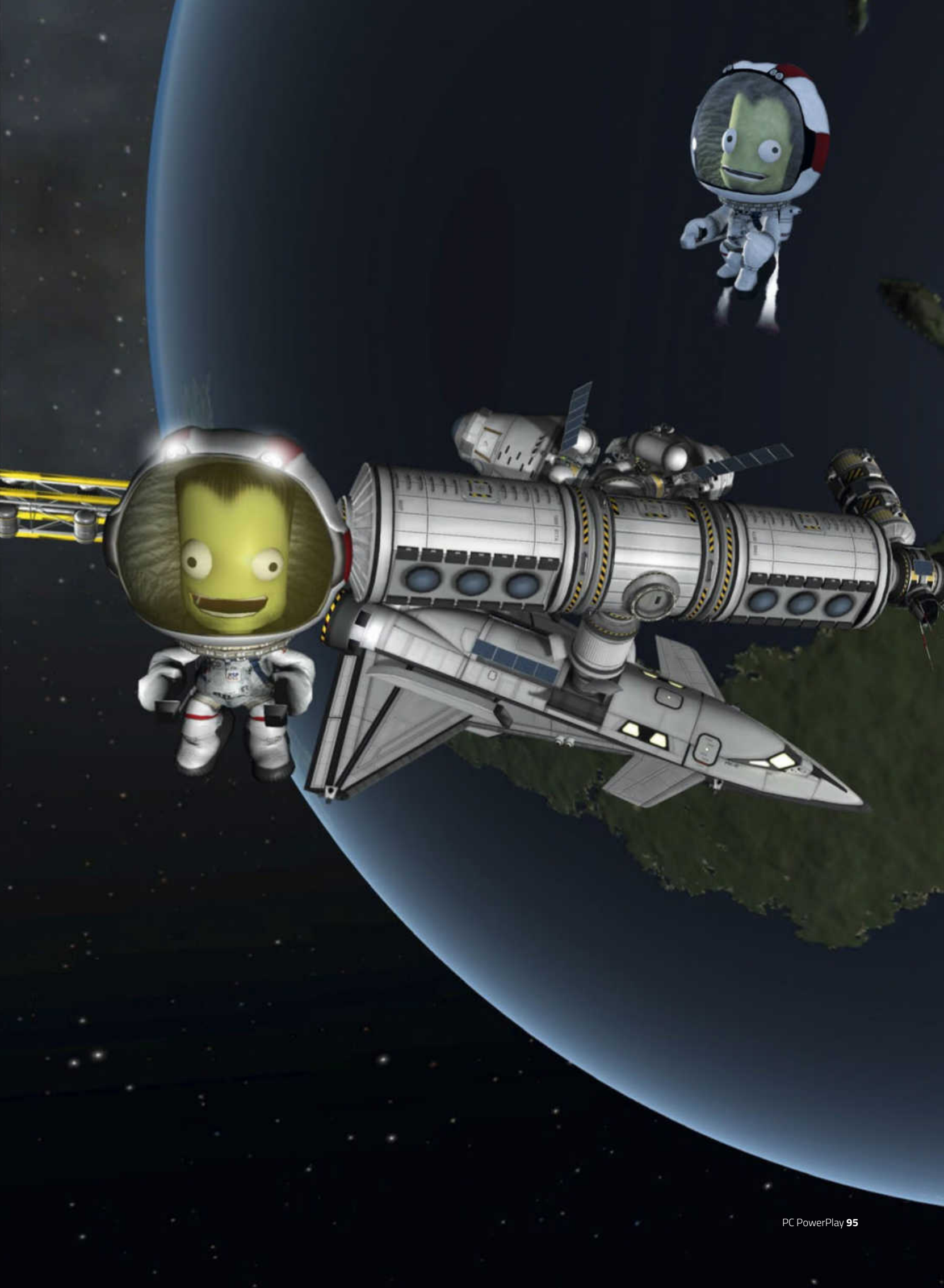
The *Grand Theft Auto* franchise features an extraordinary ability to grasp players despite the comparatively low stakes the characters face; they're personal stakes, like those found in *Scarface*, *8 Mile* and *Goodfellas*.

I can't help but feel many studios and developers have lost sight of the fact we as audiences appreciate the potential loss of a loved one, a pet, even a precious family heirloom. We simply do not need the threat of world destruction or universal death to feel invested and compelled by a film or videogame.

And the advantage developers can have is making us create our own stakes.

Increasingly this apparent need to up the ante in cinema has contributed to in a gap in the market where there's indie films with low stakes and then *The Avengers* where the world is constantly on the verge of annihilation - there's little in-between.

With so much to gripe about in the world of gaming, it's wonderful to find yet another reason to hold it up the medium as a shining example entertainment; videogame creative directors and lead developers can help their audiences experience tension through a diverse range of techniques that can place the burden on the player or the narrative. 🇬🇧



A Matter of Trust

DANIEL WILKS isn't quoting Billy Joel

A friend and former co-worker was recently forced to make a hard decision – continue working on the game they have been developing for a long while or remain employed. It wasn't a case of his passion taking over their working life and affecting their output or that they had hidden his game development and their employer found out, but rather that, after the best part of a year of knowing about the game being developed, the employers finally decided that it somehow constituted a conflict of interest. I've heard a number of reasons why this ultimatum was given, and none of them make much sense to me. I've heard that they found the game a conflict of interests because it would somehow prohibit the developer from writing about other games in a similar genre, but that doesn't ring true. To my mind, someone making a game in a certain genre is going to be better equipped to talk about the intricacies of said genre than pretty much anyone else. As far as I can see, the only conflict of interest would be if they chose to review their own game. I'd actually take that further – I think it would actually constitute a conflict of interest (or give the perception thereof) if anyone from the particular outlet were to review a game made by a current employee, but that's not the case here. It seems, at least to me, to be a pre-emptive decision to protect a company from any potential claims of conflict of interest, forcing an employee to make a difficult decision out of fear of a witch hunt rather than any actual, identifiable conflict.

A conflict of interest, when used in a non-legal sense, is defined as when a situation arises in which the aims and circumstances of the parties involved are incompatible, or when a person is in a position to benefit from decisions made in an official capacity. In this particular case, the employer took the position that someone working on a game could not then write about games that were in any way similar. I would ask why? What is it that precludes them from talking about other games in a genre they clearly love and have evident knowledge of? Is it the assumption that an employee they had faith in for years would suddenly start badmouthing the competition in some attempt to make their as yet unreleased game more popular, or

that they would start writing about their own game for the site, even though all published work is filtered through layers of edits to make sure no such breach could ever happen?


The whole concept of a conflict of interests has been overused to such an extent that it has lost all meaning. One of the claims of GamerGate was that people needed to disclose games they had contributed to through crowdfunding because writing about a game that they had "a financial stake" in would be a conflict of interests. These are also the people claiming bias and bribery if reviewers were sent a game for free. Leaving aside that finding a Kickstarter, IndieGoGo or what have you doesn't actually get you any financial stake in the final product but instead does little more than pre-orders you a copy, how is crowdfunding something make you

■ Doritogate instantly springs to mind as an instance of the games press calling out a horrendous conflict ■

any more likely to write positively about a game than if you just went out and bought it yourself? Both instances see you forking over cash for a product, only one is instant gratification and the other can take years to come to fruition. Proponents of disclosure claim that people are more likely to talk up a game because they somehow have to justify the expenditure to themselves. I would argue that buying games would theoretically put you in the same boat, no matter if the games were bought with a company budget or through a reviewer's own savings. People who are proponents of reviewers buying their own games to review rather than having them supplied by distributors and developers claim that reviewers are more likely to talk up a game because they have to justify to the industry why they deserve free games in the first place. Both are apparently conflicts of interest according to people on message boards, so which one do we

obey? Which conflict is worse? Does it even matter?

Sure, there have been some real conflicts of interest in the past, but they were pointed out by the very press being accused of said conflict. Doritogate instantly springs to mind as an instance of the games press calling out a horrendous conflict. There are also instances, both at home and abroad that could be viewed as being a conflict but have been dealt with in various mature ways. Journalists involved with PR people romantically don't cover games made or released by the company their other half works for, for example. It's a simple fix that makes something no longer a problem. There are also things that people will claim are a conflict that aren't at all. It seems to come down to a matter of trust. There seems to be an inherent distrust of anyone who is seen as a gatekeeper of culture, and for better or worse, people who write about games are kind of in that position. While some people read reviews, previews and features to be informed, others do it to have their opinions reinforced, either by agreeing with the writer or by disagreeing with them to the point that the writer has to be guilty of some crime. I'm not sure how to fix that, if there is even a possible fix. All I can do is be honest and trust the readers and the writers.

Full disclosure time. One of the PCPP freelancers is working on creating the musical system for a game at the moment and you can be sure as hell she'll be writing about it. I'll pay her and all. Why? Because hearing about how someone designs a musical system for a game is going to make for interesting content, and who better to write it than the person creating the system? Over Christmas I will be publishing a feature written by a guy developing a game about how he went about making the game. Again, who better to ask than a writer who has moved into development? Both of these freelancers will be paid to talk about something they're doing, making them benefit financially from decisions made in an official capacity. You could potentially see it as a conflict of interests but I don't. I trust my writers to do what's best for the magazine and the readers. It's not a conflict of interest. It's just interesting. 

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Backgrounds

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Fonts

Time Lines

Objects

obj_world

obj_player

obj_tree

obj_house

Rooms

level

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